

Mills & Boon

HOPE FOR TOMORROW

Anne Weale



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Jan was 'the ordinary one' in a specially talented and good-looking family; the duckling in a brood of cygnets. She was neither ravishingly pretty nor interestingly plain, she had no particular ambition, and among her family's brilliant and successful friends she was tongue-tied and shy.

So everyone was very much astonished when Simon Webster, who was a famous and successful playwright and a most attractive man, asked Jan to marry him, and her mother and sisters, much as they loved her, couldn't help expressing doubts as to whether the marriage could be a success. Jan herself had her misgivings, and they grew into fears when the beautiful actress Venetia, who had been part of Simon's past, turned up with the evident intention of linking herself with the present – and the future.

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HOPE FOR TOMORROW

Jan was just an ordinary girl, neither ravishingly pretty nor interestingly plain; she was also rather shy. So, when she captured a very distinguished and attractive husband, her family couldn't help wondering whether the marriage would be a success. Jan had her own doubts, which grew to fears when a beautiful girl from the past came back into Simon's life.

HOPE FOR TOMORROW

BY
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All the characters in this book have no existence outside the imagination of the Author, and have no relation whatsoever to anyone bearing the same name or names. They are not even distantly inspired by any individual known or unknown to the Author, and all the incidents are pure invention.

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CHAPTER I

ON her first day at the cottage, Jan managed to eat a small helping of porridge and a lightly boiled egg fresh from the neighbouring farm, and then her aunt made her wrap up warmly and told her to spend the morning on the beach.

"You're here to rest — not to help me wash dishes, my girl," Miss Meldrum said firmly, when Jan objected to these instructions. "I can't understand what that family of yours were thinking about, letting you work yourself to a shadow. I suppose they were all so busy with their own affairs that they didn't have time to notice that you were thoroughly run down."

Jan allowed her aunt to wind a thick scarf round her neck. "It wasn't their fault that I got 'flu," she said smiling.

"Maybe not — but I've no doubt they waited till the very last moment to pack you off to bed," Miss Meldrum replied severely. "They've no more sense than a pack of children — clever people rarely have. If they didn't have you to look after them, they'd be a fine old pickle."

Jan laughed. Her father's elder sister had never approved of the "Meldrum menagerie," as she called it, and her niece's arrival, late the night before, had given her added cause for censure.

"But I like looking after them, Aunt Laura," she said placidly. "I love running the house. It's the only thing I can do at all well."

"And a great deal more use than all this artistic nonsense," her aunt retorted, with feeling. "I wish your sisters were half as capable. Heaven help the men they marry if they don't learn to be a bit more practical than they are at present. It wouldn't surprise me to hear they couldn't toast a piece of bread."

"I expect the men they marry will be able to afford someone to cook for them," Jan pointed out.

"Possibly – but a man expects his wife to be more than an animated fashion plate, my dear," said Miss Meldrum. "I don't deny that they're pretty. They're charming girls. But neither of them has a pinch of common sense, and that's what counts in the long run. Now, off you go, and get some colour in those cheeks, and don't come back without an appetite because I'm roasting a chicken for our lunch."

Walking down the lane to the village, Jan grinned to herself at her aunt's strictures. Dear Aunt Laura – she was right, of course. None of the Meldrums, with the exception of herself, had very much common sense. But then they did not need it because, again with the exception of herself, they were all so wonderfully gifted in other respects.

Thinking of her family's extraordinary abilities, she heaved a long sigh and wondered for the umpteenth time why she alone had not the slightest spark of brilliance; not even a glimmer. And then, because the sun was shining and the air was tangy with salt – very different from the foggy gloom in which London had been shrouded yesterday – she dismissed this recurring puzzle from her mind and quickened her pace.

The village stood on the banks of a broad estuary flanked by spreading salt marshes. To reach the sea, one had to skirt the marshes and climb over tall sand dunes. By the time Jan reached the shore it was past ten o'clock and the fresh breeze had whipped a little colour into her pale cheeks. For a while she walked along the belt of ridged sand left by the outgoing tide, and then, seeing the metal part of a child's spade lying among the drift, she had a sudden urge to build a sand castle. It was at least ten years since she had made a castle, and, banking up the ramparts and scooping out a moat, she remembered her childhood holidays.

Those long carefree summers when nothing had mattered but the pleasures of the moment. How far away they seemed – and how blissfully uncomplicated.

She had finished work on the battlements and was paving the drawbridge with shells, when a voice said, "Hello! That's quite a fortress you've made," and, looking up, she saw a tall man standing a few feet away from her.

At first, startled out of her absorption, she stared at him warily. And then, because he did not look the kind of person whom one would prefer not to meet on a lonely stretch of beach, she sat back on her heels and said politely, "Thank you."

The man lit a cigarette while continuing to appraise her efforts. He was lean and loosely built, and dressed in shabby flannels and a fisherman's speckled guernsey. He looked about thirty-five.

"You must be Miss Meldrum's niece," he said, glancing at her.

Jan scrambled to her feet and dusted down her sandy tartan trews. "How did you know that?" she asked, surprised.

He smiled, showing very good teeth. "I'm staying at the Lord Nelson. I was in the bar last night when some old chap announced that Miss Meldrum's niece had come down from London for a fortnight's holiday. I haven't seen you around before, so it seems the obvious conclusion."

"Oh, I see. That would be old Ben Tranter. He carried my suitcase from the bus stop for me. He's a terrible gossip," Jan said, smiling.

The man grinned, and she noticed how the skin beside his eyes crinkled and two deep lines formed down his cheeks. "He told us all about you," he said. "I gather you've been on the sick list and are down here to recuperate."

"I've only had 'flu," she explained. "But it's been so foggy in London that my family thought I ought to get away for a while."

The stranger dropped on his haunches and began selecting pebbles from a patch of shingle.

"I should think you jumped at the chance, didn't you?" he said. "Isn't this about the time for exams?"

"Exams?" Jan looked blank.

Then she understood. People often took her for a teenager and now, without make-up and with her hair tousled by the wind, she evidently looked to him like a schoolgirl.

"Yes, I believe it is. But as I left school about five years ago, they don't really worry me," she said gravely.

He stood up, his eyebrows arching. "I'm sorry," he said. "I thought —"

She laughed. "It doesn't matter. Are you on holiday, too?"

He was still a good deal surprised by his mistake, and was looking at her as if he suspected her of trying to hoodwink him. "Yes, in a way," he said, after a moment. "It's a pleasant little place. I haven't been here before."

"It's too quiet for most people," she said. "They prefer the big resorts along the coast."

"I suppose so. Personally, after spending most of the year in town, I like to get away from my fellow men," he replied.

"You live in London?"

He nodded, and began spinning his stones over the water. Only one of them bounced. "I'm out of practice," he said.

Jan watched him picking up some more stones, her hands in the pockets of her aunt's sheepskin jacket. Usually she was shy of strangers, especially people in his age group. They made her feel gauche and awkward. But this man was not like the people she met at home. He looked ordinary and friendly and uncritical, and she approved of his shabby clothes and the way his thick dark hair was cut very short instead of growing rather long as was fashionable among the clever young men who escorted her beautiful sisters.

After he had spun the second lot of stones with more success, he dug in his trousers' pocket and produced a bar of chocolate which he snapped in halves.

"Hungry?" he asked, offering her a piece.

Surprisingly, after the breakfast which her aunt had made her eat, she was.

"I can't get used to your not being at school. You look about fifteen to me," he remarked presently.

"I expect it's my freckles," she said. "I used to spend

hours trying to get rid of them, but it was never any use."

"Why try? They suit you. There's nothing wrong with freckles."

"No – but they aren't very dignified," she said regretfully.

He laughed. "Do you want to be dignified?"

A faint colour warmed her thin face as she met his amused grey eyes. "Not exactly dignified, perhaps. I – I'd rather look older sometimes." Then, hastily changing the subject: "Are you staying here long?"

"A couple of weeks. I came down on Saturday. My name is Webster, by the way. Simon Webster."

"I'm Jan Meldrum."

"How do you do, Miss Meldrum." He held out a lean brown hand, his eyes twinkling at her.

They shook hands, and Jan liked the firm grip of his fingers. She was always put off if people shook hands limply.

Then he said, "Can I help you finish the castle? We'll have to be getting back for lunch pretty soon."

Presently, while they were both working on the castle – Jan completing the drawbridge and Simon Webster digging a channel to let in the afternoon tide – he said, "What's Jan short for? Janet?"

"No – Janetta, I'm afraid. It doesn't suit me a bit, but of course my parents didn't know what I'd be like."

He made no comment on this, but said, "Are you an only child?"

"Oh, no! I've got a brother and two sisters. I'm the youngest."

"What do you do with yourself when you aren't convalescing from 'flu? Training for something?"

"I've finished training." She told him a little about the two-year domestic science course which she had taken on leaving school and how, now, because her mother was busy with other things, she ran their house in Kensington. "What do you do, Mr. Webster?" she asked.

He was watching a freighter out at sea and did not reply immediately. Then he said, "I'm tied to a desk all day."

"That's why I like to get out into the open when I can."

At noon they began to walk back. On the way, Jan discovered that he shared her love of books and that their tastes in literature were much alike. She was quite disappointed when, in what seemed a very short time, they reached the path to the village.

But, outside the Lord Nelson, instead of saying goodbye, he told her that he had hired a sailing dinghy and asked if she would like to go out in it with him after lunch.

"Why, yes, I'd love to," she said eagerly. "But I don't know anything about boats. Won't I be in the way?"

"Not at all – if your aunt won't mind your coming with me."

"Oh, no. Why should she?"

He ran a hand over his jaw, regarding her thoughtfully for a moment. "I think I had better come up and have a word with her," he said, at length. "I'll walk over about two o'clock. All right?"

When, five minutes later, Jan arrived at the cottage, her aunt was gratified to see that her cheeks were a healthy pink and that, already, she seemed to have gained new vitality.

Although she made no comment beyond, "That will be nice for you, dear," when her niece told her about meeting Mr. Webster and being invited to sail with him, she waited his arrival with considerable interest.

That afternoon on the water was one of the happiest Jan had known for a long time – and it was the first of many. Miss Meldrum took an immediate liking to Simon and invited him to supper to finish the chicken, and later they played cards and talked till nearly eleven. In the ten days that followed, he was often at the cottage, delighting his hostess by eating large portions of her excellent home-made tarts, and making Jan happy because, for the first time since leaving school, she had found someone other than her aunt with whom to be wholly at ease.

"You'll miss Simon when he goes back to London on

Monday," Miss Meldrum said, one night when their visitor had just returned to the village.

Jan put away the cribbage board and joined her aunt by the fire. By day the weather was mild and springlike, but the nights were still cool and the logs on the broad stone hearth gave out a comfortable warmth.

"Yes, I will," she said thoughtfully. "He's been terribly nice to me — teaching me to sail and everything."

"Why shouldn't he be? He's been glad of your company," her aunt said, putting down her knitting. "Perhaps you'll see more of him when you're both back in town."

"Oh, I shouldn't think so. I expect he has lots of friends, and we'll both be working again," Jan said in a matter-of-fact tone which was not quite how she felt about it.

Later, alone in her room, she leaned on the little window seat and wondered if she *would* see Simon again. Although he was at least ten years her senior and they had known each other such a short time, she knew that his departure would leave a blank in her life.

She had never entirely believed the old saw: "What you never have, you never miss." One would have to be very insensitive not to be conscious that one was missing something as fundamental as friendship, she thought sadly. It would be truer to say: "What you can have only for a little while, it is better not to have at all."

Presently, brushing her hair, she studied her reflection in the looking glass and knew that her aunt was right in saying that this fortnight on the coast had done her a great deal of good. She had arrived looking thin and drawn and listless. Now the hollows under her cheekbones had filled out a little and her skin had lost its pallor. Even her hair was glossier. The trouble was that no amount of sea air and nourishing country fare could change her colouring or alter her bone structure, she reflected with a wry mouth.

On Sunday the fine weather broke. Jan woke up to find rain streaming down her window panes, and by ten o'clock there was still no sign of the downpour slackening. They had

arranged to take a picnic lunch to the pine woods about a mile along the shore, but at eleven Simon rang up and said that, as they would obviously have to cancel this plan, he would come round in the evening to say good-bye.

Disappointed and a little puzzled that he was not going to lunch with them at the cottage, Jan replaced the receiver and went to tell her aunt. The rain continued to lash down until five o'clock, when it finally cleared, the storm clouds rolling away to the west and revealing a darkening blue sky pierced with the first faint stars.

Miss Meldrum always spent Sunday evenings watching the television play with a friend who lived nearby. She had just put on her coat when they heard the creak of the gate and footsteps crunching on the gravel. Jan, for whom the day had seemed interminable, flew to open the door.

But, although Simon smiled at her as he entered the narrow hall, she thought he looked somewhat preoccupied. Since he would probably have gone before Miss Meldrum returned, her aunt said goodbye to him and Simon thanked her warmly for her hospitality.

"What have you been doing with yourself today?" he asked Jan, as they went into the cosy little sitting-room with its deep chintz-covered arm-chairs and polished oak dresser.

"Oh, nothing very much. Just odds and ends," she said vaguely.

He propped his long legs on the rim of the worn stone kerb and looked at the leaping flames. "I expect you'll be glad to get home," he said quietly. "You must miss your family."

Jan made a non-committal sound and played with a loose thread on the arm of her chair. After that first morning on the beach they had not discussed her family, and she did not want to be reminded that her stay at the cottage was nearly over. When she looked up, she found that Simon was watching her rather intently.

"What's the matter?" she asked. "Have I got a smudge on my nose?"

He was silent for a moment. "When we first met, I had the impression that you weren't too happy," he said. "I thought perhaps you were trying to get over an unhappy love affair or something." A slight smile curved his mouth. "That was after I found you were old enough to have had one, of course."

Her eyes widened. "Whatever made you think that?" she asked in astonishment.

He shrugged. "Young girls do take these knocks," he said lightly. "I gather I was wrong."

She gave him a candid look. "I wasn't terribly happy, but it had nothing to do with love."

"And it's over now?"

She hesitated, biting her lower lip. "I don't think it will ever be over," she said drily, after a pause.

"That sounds very pessimistic. Most problems have some solution," he said gently.

And then, partly because she had never been able to speak of it to anyone before, and partly because he seemed the one person who might understand, she found herself trying to explain the crushing sense of being hopelessly dull and inadequate which had oppressed her for so long.

She had been about twelve years old when it had first dawned on her that the difference between herself and the rest of her family was more than a physical one. At that age, it had not seemed important that she lacked the glowing auburn hair and vividly blue eyes which the other Meldrum children had inherited from their beautiful and brilliant mother. She had not really minded being the only one to have to wear braces on her teeth, and to have a snub freckled nose and lank dark hair. The pain of realising that she was a duckling among cygnets had come later, in her teens. It had been the gradual dawning that she alone had no special gift, no burning ambition, no flair for anything artistic, which had filled her with despair. In an ordinary household her mediocrity would not have mattered. But the Meldrums were not ordinary; they were outstanding in both looks and

intellect and charm. Very naturally, they chose friends who were as clever and successful as themselves, and this, for Jan, was the most crushing aspect of the situation.

She had soon learnt that her family were bored by or critical of her own choice of friends. Alternatively, she was terrified of theirs. The amusing anecdotes and barbed witticisms which were tossed into conversation at their parties made her feel witless and tonguetied; the poise and sophistication of the people who visited the house emphasised her own lack of assurance.

"So you see," she concluded bleakly, "there's nothing anyone can do about it. I sometimes think I must be a changeling. I'm certainly a fish out of water."

Simon had heard her out in silence, his expression unreadable. "Can't you get away – make your own life?" he asked now.

Jan sighed. "I've thought of that," she admitted. "But, you see, my mother is too busy with her painting to cope with the house and, just as I finished my training, our last cook gave notice. So I more or less had to take over the reins. And – I love them. They're my family. It's meeting their friends and all these terrifying parties which I dread so much."

"I think you underestimate yourself," he said gravely. "You may not be as striking to look at as your sisters, or as noticeably talented – although to be able to run a house is no mean ability, you know – but you're certainly not a non-entity. Why are you so nervous of these people? You're not afraid of me."

She smiled. "I would be if you were someone terribly distinguished. I'm all right with normal people. I get on quite well with them." A log fell into the hearth and she bent to poke it back, a wing of hair falling across her forehead. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to unburden my difficulties on you," she said apologetically. "I'll make some coffee."

When she returned from the kitchen, he was standing with his back to the fire, his expression withdrawn. But almost at once he put his thoughts aside and helped with the

tray, and for the rest of the evening they talked of general subjects.

It was striking ten o'clock when he rose to leave, and, as always when she was with him, the time seemed to have flown.

"When are you going home?" he asked, at the door.

"On Thursday, I think." She held out her hand. "Thank you for taking me sailing and . . . and everything. I've enjoyed it so much."

In the moments that her fingers rested in his, she waited for him to suggest another meeting. But he only said, "So have I. It's been a good holiday. Good-bye, Janetta. Take care of yourself."

And then he was gone.

Back in the sitting-room, Jan made up the fire and sank into a chair. She wondered why he called her Janetta, and if he had really enjoyed himself or was just being kind. Then, telling herself that it was just a holiday acquaintance and that there was no reason for him to want to see her again, she picked up a magazine and tried to dismiss him from her mind.

"Thank heaven you're back, darling. The house is in complete chaos and there's something wrong with the boiler," said Leila Meldrum, kissing her youngest daughter and sinking on to the sofa with a sigh of relief.

Jan unbuttoned her raincoat and pulled off her grey beret. Travelling by an earlier train than the one she had meant to catch, she had walked into the drawing-room to find her mother poking hopefully at a half-hearted fire with one hand, and nibbling a biscuit with the other.

Leila Meldrum had married at seventeen, and now, in her middle forties, she looked a youthful thirty-five. Although in many respects she was maddeningly vague and improvident, these failings did not apply to her work or her appearance. A well-known painter and illustrator, she worked hard and to an exacting standard and, when not busy in her

studio, she was usually occupied with preserving and enhancing her looks.

"Is that all you've had to eat while I've been away – stale wine biscuits?" Jan enquired, taking the poker and urging the fire to life.

"Oh, we've managed quite well, darling – all things considered," her mother said airily. "You may find some of the pans a wee bit burned, and I think Mrs. Banks has broken quite a few cups, but at least we haven't starved. I must admit I'm looking forward to your cooking again," she added, eyeing the biscuits with disfavour.

"What would you do if I got married and went away?" Jan asked, laughing.

"I suppose we'd have to try to get another cook, darling." Leila said carelessly. "Why? You aren't thinking of it, are you?"

"Hardly. I haven't any suitors," Jan said drily.

"Well, I don't know why not," her mother remarked. "When I was a girl I was absolutely surrounded by them, and the house always seems to be packed with young men to me."

"Yes; but they happen to belong to Marigold and Linda."

Mrs. Meldrum wandered over to a mirror and examined her complexion with a faint frown. "I'm sure they could spare you a couple," she said, over her shoulder. Then, half to herself: "I wonder if this new face cream is quite safe? It's full of hormones and things – I do hope it won't give me a moustache."

Jan grinned and began to tidy the room. Her mother had welcomed her warmly and was glad to have her back, but already she was preoccupied with her own concerns and, once the household was running smoothly again, she would hardly be aware of her youngest child's existence. It was the same when the others came home. They hugged and kissed her, commented on her improved appearance, praised the meal she had prepared for them – and then forgot all about her. As far as they were concerned, she was part of the back-

ground; capable little Jan who kept the home fires burning very efficiently but never had much to say for herself.

One evening, about a week later, Jan was mending some of Marigold's diaphanous underwear and the rest of the family were discussing an exhibition of controversy-provoking sculptures, when the telephone rang.

Paul Meldrum reached for the receiver. Ten years older than his wife, with thick grey hair and a carefully clipped moustache, he could still cause a flutter of excitement among his daughters' contemporaries, and older women were equally susceptible to his urbane charm. Fortunately, he was still as wholly devoted to Leila as when, an ambitious young architect, he had swept her out of an art school to become his bride.

"It's for you, Jan," he said, looking mildly surprised. "Some chap asking for Miss Janetta Meldrum."

Jan pricked her finger, hardly daring to hope that it might be Simon. But who else would ask for her by her full name? Becoming aware that the others had stopped talking and were watching her with mingled surprise and amusement, she blushed crimson, took the receiver from her father and said faintly, "Hello?"

"Janetta?" The deep quiet voice sent her spirits soaring. "This is Simon. How are you?"

"Oh . . . I'm fine."

"Good – and free tomorrow night?"

"Why, yes. Yes, I think so."

"Can you meet me at Oxford Circus at half past six?"

"Y-yes. I'd like to," she stammered.

"Right. Six-thirty on the north side. Sorry I can't collect you, but I'll explain that when I see you. Sleep tight."

For a moment after he had rung off, she held the receiver to her ear, scarcely able to believe that she had really heard his voice. Then she put the receiver down and turned to face her family.

"Aren't you going to tell us who he is, sweetie?" Linda asked, intrigued. It was a new and diverting departure from

routine when Jan had a phone call from a man.

"It was nobody, really," Jan said uncomfortably.

"It must have been *somebody*, my dear," her brother Alistair observed.

Jan flushed. "Well . . . that is . . . it was only a friend."

"Oh, Lord – not that dreary George What's-it again?" Linda asked, frowning.

Jan shook her head. George Baker was a pleasant but rather dim young man who had pursued her in a mild way for a short time the previous year. The family had teased him unmercifully and nicknamed him Beau Baker because of his unfortunate penchant for fox-patterned ties and check waistcoats. After two or three visits to the house, he had faded away.

"No. This is someone I met on holiday," she explained nervously. "He – he wants me to go out with him tomorrow night."

"Where's he taking you?" asked Marigold.

"I don't know yet. I'm meeting him at Oxford Circus."

"What an extraordinary idea! Why isn't he coming to fetch you?" her sister asked, arching her delicate eyebrows. Her own escorts always collected her in taxis or rakish sports cars; and she would have no more considered a street corner rendezvous than going out without make-up.

"I hope he's respectable. You haven't picked up a dubious character, have you, pet?" said Linda, looking amused.

At that, Jan, who rarely got angry, lifted her chin and said coldly, "I'm twenty-two, not twelve, Linda. I think I'm old enough to go out with whomever I please."

"Stop teasing the child. She doesn't quiz you two sirens," her father said kindly, pinching her cheek.

Jan flashed him a grateful look.

Later that night Linda tapped on her door and said, "Darling, you didn't take it seriously – our teasing you about your new boy-friend, did you?"

"No, of course not," Jan said, smiling. She was sitting up in bed, reading a new library book and looking very young

in yellow Viyella pyjamas with a ribbon in her hair.

Linda, tall and willowy, in a filmy coral *négligé*, sat on the end of the bed and began shaping her nails with an emery board. "What are you going to wear to meet him?" she asked.

"My grey suit, I suppose," Jan said.

"Oh, darling, not that old thing. It makes you look like a product of St. Trinian's," Linda said, wrinkling her nose. "Of course it's difficult if you don't know where you're going. You'll just have to prepare for all eventualities. Is he reasonably rich?"

"I haven't the faintest idea. I shouldn't think so," Jan said, remembering Simon's well-worn tweed jackets and ancient slacks.

"I know — you can have my green wool, the one with the scarf collar," Linda offered.

"But it would be too long for me," Jan objected.

"Not if you take up the hem. You can have it for keeps, darling. It's never been right for me," her sister said, with unusual generosity. "Lop a foot off the bottom — that's all it needs. Those high-waisted styles fit anyone."

So, the following evening, Jan set out to meet Simon, her eyes bright with excitement, her confidence boosted by the knowledge that, after a few alterations, Linda's cast-off dress did suit her very well.

The Underground was crowded and stuffy and she got off at Piccadilly and walked slowly up Regent Street, looking in the shop windows and wondering if he, too, would look different in town clothes. She reached their meeting place five minutes early and wandered towards Broadcasting House to kill time. Then, as she retraced her steps, she saw him standing by the shop windows, looking at his watch.

He saw her a second before she reached him and they both smiled without speaking for a moment. In a grey suit and dark tie, he did look different: but just as friendly and reassuring.

"Hello," he said quietly.

Jan knew she was beaming from ear to ear, but she couldn't help it. "Hello," she said happily.

They crossed the circus and walked back towards Piccadilly, and Simon explained that he had not been able to call for her because he had had a late business appointment and had only just got away.

"I thought you might like to see the new Michael Caine film at the Odeon – unless you've seen it already?" he suggested. "No? Good. Then we'll grab a cab and be just in time for the second feature."

After the cinema he took her to an unpretentious but comfortable little restaurant on the fringe of Soho.

"You sounded as if you were surprised to hear from me last night," he said, as they lingered over coffee.

"I was," Jan said frankly. She traced a pattern on the cloth for a moment before adding hesitantly, "Sometimes it can be disillusioning to meet holiday friends in everyday surroundings."

He grinned at her. "Did you read that in some advice column? It may well apply to shipboard romances, but not to our kind of friendship, I fancy."

The tone in which he said "our kind of friendship" kindled a warm glow of pleasure inside her, and she said, "But you must have lots of friends, haven't you?"

"I know a lot of people – I wouldn't describe many of them as friends," he said, a shade cynically. "Most of them have an eye to the main chance. They think I might possibly be useful to them some time, so they make a point of clapping me on the back and standing me a drink at regular intervals."

"What exactly do you do? You said it was a desk job, but I'm sure it must be something interesting."

It seemed to her that his eyes narrowed slightly, but perhaps it was only her fancy.

"What makes you think so?" he asked casually.

"I don't know exactly – but you don't look as if you spent

your life dictating letters about 're your communication of the 13th ult.,' " she said, smiling.

He lit a cigarette and leaned back in his chair. "No, it isn't quite as dull as that," he agreed. "I deal with people – sorting out their problems and so on. I suppose you could call it a form of personnel work."

"I should think you must be very good at it. You're so easy to talk to," she said seriously.

He smiled. "Your father will want to talk to me if I don't take you home. It's after eleven." He signalled to the waiter to bring their bill and asked for a taxi to be called.

"Oh, please – can't we go by tube? Taxis are so expensive," Jan said quickly, as the man hurried off to telephone.

"I think the budget will run to it," Simon said easily. "Or are you doubtful about driving in a taxi with someone you were never formally introduced to?"

She coloured. "No, of course not!"

"I think perhaps you should be. I'm a rather dubious escort for someone of your tender years," he remarked, with a hint of amusement. He helped her to put on her coat and touched her cheek lightly with his forefinger. "You're a nice young thing, Janetta Meldrum," he said gently.

Outside her house, he handed her down from the cab and said, "When can I see you again? Are you free on Friday?"

"Yes, as far as I know."

"Same time, same place?"

She nodded. "That would be lovely. Thank you for to-night, Simon. I have enjoyed it."

"So have I. Till Friday, then. Good night, child." He waited for her to climb the steps and then, with a wave of his hand, he climbed back into the cab and disappeared.

On Friday they went to see another film, and on Sunday afternoon he took her out of London in an old and battered car which he had been able to borrow from a friend. They spent the afternoon walking by a quiet riverside and had supper at a roadside hotel. In five weeks they saw each other eleven times and, each time, Jan returned home with greater

confidence in herself and the wonderful inner security of knowing that soon she would see him again.

Her family, busy with their own pursuits, did not seem to notice her absences, and the fact that both her sisters were currently embroiled in rather turbulent love affairs provided a screen for her own activities. It did not occur to Jan that there was anything odd about her relationship with Simon, or that there were aspects of his life about which she knew little or nothing. She knew his telephone number, but not his private address or that of the firm for which he worked. She knew that, before settling down to his present job, he had travelled round the world by working his passage on cargo ships. But he never spoke of his boyhood or of his relatives. If anyone had suggested that it was odd that he always arranged to meet her in a public place and courteously refused her invitations to come in for a cup of coffee when he brought her home, she would have resented the implication. She trusted him.

Although she did not admit it to herself, she was glad there were no opportunities for her family to meet him. Remembering poor George Baker and how unmercifully they had baited him, she was afraid that something similar might happen with Simon. Not that he was diffident and slightly uncouth like George; but she knew her family and subconsciously dreaded a recurrence of that other unhappy episode in any form.

One evening, as they were strolling along the Embankment, Simon said, "Do you like dancing?"

"Yes, I love it — but I don't often get the chance."

"Right. Let's make this Friday a special occasion," he suggested. "Dinner and dancing at one of the plushy night-spots. Now don't start worrying about whether it will break me. I wouldn't ask you if I couldn't afford it."

The day before their date Jan drew some money out of her small bank account and bought herself a short evening dress of palest yellow chiffon with a band of matching velvet high under the bosom and two long streamers floating down

to the hem. She already had a pair of silver slippers and a silver mesh theatre purse and, with the blond fur jacket which her father had given her for her twenty-first birthday, she felt that she would look reasonably well turned out wherever Simon planned to take her.

Fortunately, the others were all out that night: her parents at a dinner party and their elder children at a studio hop given by some friends. Jan had been invited to the party but had been able to excuse herself without exciting comment.

Simon was calling for her this time and she was sitting in the hall when the bell rang, beset by last-minute doubts about the suitability of her dress. When she opened the door and saw him standing under the porch light in a well-cut dinner jacket and immaculate linen, she was suddenly overcome with shyness. He looked so tall and distinguished, quite unlike the shabby wind-blown man she had met that first day by the sea.

As the taxi took them into the West End he chatted as easily as usual, seemingly unaware that she had little to say. Jan had little knowledge of what he had called "the plushy night-spots," and when the taxi drew up in a narrow street and Simon sprang out to help her alight, she read the illuminated sign above them without recognition.

A uniformed commissionaire opened the doors for them and they passed through a small foyer into an expensively decorated lounge where a few people were sitting about with drinks.

"Ah, Mr. Webster. Good evening, sir. Good evening, madam," said a dignified man in evening dress who had emerged from a doorway as they entered.

He beckoned another attendant and they were led down a thickly carpeted staircase into a large dimly lit room ranged with small tables, about half of which were occupied. At the other end of the room was a circular dance floor and, beyond it, a low dais where a band was playing a hit song from a new musical comedy.

With Simon just behind her, Jan followed the Latin-

looking attendant to a table in a lamplit alcove.

While Simon was occupied with the menu and wine list, she looked about, wondering if this was one of the places to which her sisters were frequently taken. The women at the other tables and those on the dance floor were so beautifully dressed that she began to feel that her own yellow chiffon must look sadly cheap and ordinary by comparison. She was glad the table was not in the centre of the room where they would attract more attention.

Presently the man who had first greeted them came downstairs and stopped at their table, expressing the hope that they would have an enjoyable evening and adding, rather cryptically, that he had not overlooked Mr. Webster's instructions.

When he had gone, Jan was about to ask Simon what these instructions were, but he turned to her and said, "What a charming dress. It makes you look like a primrose."

Startled and faintly excited by something in his tone, she forgot her question.

All through the delicious meal her feet were tapping to the music and, at last, when the table had been cleared except for coffee and liqueurs, Simon said, "Shall we dance?"

As he stood aside to let her precede him on to the floor, she found that her heart was beating unaccountably fast and that, absurdly, she was a little afraid of turning and having him put his arms round her. When he did and they moved out among the other dancers, her throat tightened and a queer tingling sensation ran down her spine.

She was glad that he did not talk like most of the other men, as, at first, she had to concentrate on following his lead. Then, as she grew accustomed to his relaxed style, it was enough to be dancing to a lilting tune. He held her quite loosely, but she was very conscious of his hand against her back and of the muscular firmness of his arm beneath her fingers.

Presently he apologised for not being able to do the cha-cha which followed their waltz, and they returned to their

table. But as soon as the band played a quickstep they danced again.

About ten o'clock there was a cabaret show given by a small group of first-class artistes, and afterwards the central lights were lowered to little more than a flicker and the band returned to play a slow foxtrot. This time Simon held her closer to him, so close that she was afraid he would feel the quickened beating of her heart. She was half-relieved, half-disappointed when the music ended.

Some time later, a party of newcomers arrived, and among them Jan saw a girl who was a friend of Marigold. But although the girl sat down at a table quite close to them she did not appear to have recognised Jan.

At a quarter to twelve Simon suggested that they should leave, and while he was paying the bill Jan went to the powder room to repair her make-up. When she came out into the upstairs lounge Simon was studying a mural, his back to her. She walked over and touched his sleeve and he swung round. And at the same moment another party came through the entrance. A handsome grey-haired woman in emerald satin and a mink stole was leading the way, and, as her glance fell on Simon, a surprised smile curved her thin scarlet lips.

"Why, Simon, my dear!" she exclaimed, sweeping forward. "Where have you been hiding all these weeks? No one has laid eyes on you. We thought you must be abroad." She noticed Jan and her cold eyes took in the yellow dress with a swift but comprehensive glance. "What are you up to, mysterious creature?" she enquired archly, looking at Simon again.

His fingers, which had been clasping Jan's elbow, tightened a fraction. He did not smile.

"Hello, Agnes. Nice to see you," he said coolly. "Will you excuse us? We're in rather a rush. Good night."

And, leaving the woman to stare after them in offended astonishment, he propelled Jan quickly through her group of friends and out into the street. A taxi was already drawn up

at the kerb and, as he put her into it, Jan thought she heard him swear under his breath. Then he gave the driver her address and got in beside her.

After a moment or two he said, "I'm sorry about that, I'm afraid I was very rude — but that woman is an arch-bore and would have kept us talking half the night if I'd introduced her."

Jan said nothing and they drove some way in silence until finally he reached for her hand and said, "It was quite inexcusable. I'm sorry, my dear."

"I don't mind. You didn't snub me," she said gently.

He played with her fingers. "You don't approve of hurting people's feelings, even if they are thoroughly unpleasant, do you?"

"No, I don't think I do. But it's not my business what you do," she answered.

"Isn't it?" he said. "I wonder." He let go of her hand and she heard the click of his cigarette case being opened, followed by the flare of the lighter. He expelled a thin stream of smoke. "I wish I were ten years younger," he said quietly.

"Why? Was your life better ten years ago?"

He made a sound that might have been a laugh. "Far from it. Perhaps I should have wished that you were ten years older. There's quite a gulf between twenty-two and thirty-four, you know."

"I haven't noticed it," she said seriously.

"Haven't you, child? Then perhaps it's not as wide as it sometimes seems to be."

A short distance from her home, he said, "It's a fine night. Let's walk the rest of the way, shall we?" and rapped on the glass partition.

"How will you get home?" she asked, when he had paid the fare.

"I'll walk. It isn't very far." He slipped his hand through her arm.

They did not talk and their footsteps echoed along the silent street. Jan watched their shadows lengthen and shorten

between the lamp-posts, Simon's shadow several feet longer than her own. As they turned a corner, a gust of wind blew past them and she drew her jacket closer about her throat.

"Are you cold? I'm sorry: I forgot your thin dress," he said, drawing her closer to his side.

"I'm not cold. It was just that sudden draught."

"Women must be very tough creatures," he said. "One minute you're muffled to the ears and the next you're floating about in a few bits of silk and lace. It would kill a man."

She laughed. "To be beautiful, one must suffer."

They reached the steps of her house and he turned to face her.

"Do you know that you were the only girl in the place who was worth a second glance?"

She looked down at her purse. "I don't think you can have paid much attention to them, then. There were several who were very glamorous."

"Very likely," he said drily. "But there's a world of difference between that carefully contrived gloss called glamour and the quality which you have."

She did not look up at him. He was standing with his back to the nearest pool of lamplight, so that his face was in shadow while her own was dimly illumined. Somehow this made her feel at a disadvantage.

"It — it's been a wonderful evening, Simon," she said, stammering slightly.

They walked up the steps and she found her latchkey and waited while he unlocked the door for her. Now the small bulb under the portico showed her his face and she saw that the muscles at his jaw were clenched, his eyes oddly dark.

"I have to go away this week-end and I may not be back until late next week, so I won't see you for a while. I'll phone you as soon as I'm free," he said.

Jan nodded. "Thank you for . . . for all your kindness, Simon."

"Kindness!" His voice had a strange ring.

And then his hands were on her shoulders and he was

very close to her, his face only a few inches above her own. Jan held her breath. She wanted him to kiss her, and yet she was afraid of the change it would make in their relationship. Already the night had shown her that her feeling for him was not as simple as she had thought. She knew that she had only to say "Good night" and he would let her go and the moment would be postponed. It was as if they were standing on the brink of an unseen abyss. She could either play safe and retreat, or she could risk a leap into the unknown, trusting to his judgment to see her safely across.

But, even as she recognised the choice, his fingers tipped up her chin and his other arm slipped round her waist. She closed her eyes and waited, trembling a little. And then, in the split second before either of them had committed themselves, a car turned into the street and came towards them.

"Good night, little one. Take care of yourself," Simon said huskily, close to her ear.

And, before she could answer him, he had gone down the steps and was striding away into the darkness.

The only member of the family who had to be up early in the morning was Alistair, and he rarely had more than a cup of coffee and some toast before leaving for the offices of the commercial television company by whom he was employed in a junior executive capacity expected to lead to higher things.

When Jan went down to the kitchen-cum-breakfast room next morning, she found that he had already made the coffee and was deep in the morning paper.

"I'm sorry, Alistair, I overslept," she said guiltily, starting to lay the table in readiness for the others.

"Not to worry, infant. I feel a bit foggy myself. Pity you didn't come with us to the Harpers' last night. It was a darn good party."

Shortly after Alistair's departure her father came in, a spotted cravat tucked into the collar of his dark silk dressing gown, the morning post in his hand.

"Must that woman start that infernal machine at this hour?" he exclaimed irritably, referring to their daily help, who arrived at eight o'clock and who was at present vacuum-cleaning the dining-room.

Jan gave him a glass of fruit juice and broke an egg into the frying pan. Her father was always liverish first thing in the morning, particularly after a late night.

"Take something up to your mother, will you, my dear," Mr. Meldrum said presently. "She says she has a headache, and I'm not at all surprised. The claret they gave us was abominable."

At nine, Linda appeared and gulped down a cup of black coffee before rushing off to her first modelling engagement. The last to descend was Marigold.

"Oh, *not* bacon, darling. I feel like hell. Lord knows what they put in the punch last night," she said, a hand to her forehead. "Thank goodness it's my free day today. I probably look as ghastly as I feel."

"Alistair said you had fun," Jan remarked, fetching more fruit juice from the refrigerator.

"Yes, it was quite amusing – and I met the most divine man there," Marigold admitted, brightening a little at this last recollection. "That reminds me, I'm lunching with him. Do you think you could press my cream suit for me? I really must get some new clothes. I haven't a rag to my back."

Jan grinned. The fitted wardrobe in the room which her sisters shared was packed with all the latest modes, but they were continually proclaiming that they hadn't a stitch between them.

The telephone began to ring, and Marigold groaned and snatched off the receiver.

"Hello. Who? Oh, Susan – hello! What happened to you last night? The Fandango? Oh, well, much more fun than the Harpers' hop, I should think. What's the new floor show like?"

Jan, brewing fresh coffee, stiffened. The Fandango was where she and Simon had spent the evening, and she remem-

bered now that the girl she had seen there was Susan Barnes, a student at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art.

Marigold signalled to her to find a cigarette and she did so, watching her sister's expression as she listened to the voice at the other end of the line. Had Susan seen her after all? And would Marigold start to probe when she discovered that her youngest sister had suddenly taken to night-clubbing?

"What's that?" Marigold asked. "Oh, darling, you must be mistaken. Jan spent last night at home! *With who?* Oh, but that's crazy! Absolutely impossible! Wait — hold on a minute, will you?"

She put her hand over the mouthpiece and said, "You *were* at home last night, weren't you? Susan has some mad idea that she saw you at the Fandango."

A traitorous flush crept up from Jan's throat and Marigold's blue eyes widened incredulously.

Speaking to her friend again, she said, "Are you *sure* it was him, Sue? Well, I'm blowed — who would have thought it! Look, I want to get to the bottom of this. I'll ring you back later. 'Bye."

Replacing the receiver, she drew on her cigarette and regarded Jan with mingled fascination and disbelief.

"Well, come on, Cinderella — explain!" she commanded, after a moment. "Are you keeping something from us, or is Susan suffering from hallucinations? She swears that she saw you at the Fandango last night — and with Simon Webster, of all people."

Jan ran the hot tap and reached for a packet of detergent. "Yes, I was there, since you ask," she admitted quietly. "I didn't tell you because I didn't think you'd be interested. But how did she know who I was with? Simon didn't seem to know her."

"I don't suppose he does. She doesn't move in his exalted circles yet," Marigold replied, looking more and more astounded. "Ye gods! Fancy you being wined and dined around town by someone like Simon Webster. I simply can't get over it."

It was Jan's turn to look perplexed. "What do you mean, Marigold? Have *you* met him, then? I'm sure you can't have done. He would have told me."

"No, I haven't *met* him," her sister said coolly. "That's hardly necessary. I go to the theatre quite often, you know, and I read the papers."

"The theatre? What has that to do with it?" Jan asked.

Marigold's eyebrows flew up and she stared at the younger girl as if she had suddenly discovered that her sister was mildly deranged. And then she began to laugh, peal after peal of hilarious laughter, her shoulders quaking with mirth.

"Marigold, stop it! What are you talking about? How do you know Simon?" Jan exclaimed urgently, seizing her sister by the shoulders and almost shaking her.

Marigold drew a long breath and wiped her eyes. "Oh, darling, you are the end!" she gasped. "You really don't know, do you? You've been out with him and danced with him and probably canoodled in a taxi with him – and you haven't the foggiest notion who he is! Oh, this is marvellous! I can't wait to tell the others. They'll fall flat with laughing. It's so absolutely typical."

"But *who is he?*" Jan cried desperately. And, even as she asked, something stirred in the recesses of her memory – a name once read or heard, but never connected with the man she had thought her friend. "Oh . . . no! No! He *can't* be!" she whispered despairingly.

Marigold saw the sudden appalled comprehension in her eyes and began to laugh again.

"That's right, sweetie," she gurgled delightedly. "The penny has finally dropped. He's the man who wrote *Nothing But My Life* and *The Mallory Affair* and *Storm Cloud*. In fact he's just about the most successful playwright in three continents. And you didn't know who he was! It's the funniest thing I've heard of in years."

CHAPTER II

WHEN Leila Meldrum drifted into the kitchen to fill the ice-bag which someone had sent her from America, she found one of her daughters convulsed with laughter and the other looking as if the bottom had dropped out of her world.

"This house is worse than the zoo," she complained fretfully. "First I have to endure the noise of Mrs. Bates vacuuming the landing and singing at the top of her voice, and now I find you in hysterics, Marigold. I wish *I* felt like laughing. My head is splitting. Fill this bag for me, will you, Jan?"

Rather white about the mouth, her movements slow and listless, Jan took the bag and fetched an ice-tray.

"You'd better have a cup of coffee, Mother. You'll need something to sustain you when you hear what Little Sister has been up to," said Marigold, recovering herself.

Mrs. Meldrum sat down at the table and folded the skirts of her quilted housecoat about her knees. "What have you been doing, Jan?" she asked, without much interest.

Jan bit her lip and began to crush the ice. She was still numb from the shock of Marigold's revelation.

"She's been on the razzle — but you'll never guess who with," her sister said mockingly. "The child has hidden depths. I wish *I* could capture someone like Simon Webster."

"Simon Webster?" Leila's eyebrows contracted. "What *are* you babbling about, Marigold?"

Marigold explained, enjoying her mother's incredulity.

"But how could you possibly not know who he was?" she demanded of Jan, when she began to believe that there must be an element of truth in Marigold's story.

Jan made a small helpless gesture. "It never occurred to me," she said dully. "He — he told me he was a personnel officer. I just didn't connect him with . . . with *the* Simon

Webster." She faltered over the name and her mouth quivered.

"But didn't you recognise him?" her mother exclaimed in some exasperation.

Jan shook her head.

"She has some excuse there, I suppose. He does seem to avoid publicity now. I've only seen one or two pictures of him myself, and you know Jan never bothers to read the gossip columns or the glossies," Marigold pointed out.

"But where did you meet him?" Leila demanded.

"When I was staying with Aunt Laura. He was at the village pub."

"What an extraordinary place for him to be," her mother said perplexedly. "Have you been out with him before, then?"

"Yes — once or twice," Jan admitted, flushing.

"I suppose he was so intrigued to find someone who'd hardly heard of him that he thought it might be amusing to play up for a while," Marigold said carelessly. "Personally I should have thought you would have been frightened to death of him, sweetie. You always run a mile when Christopher comes here, and he's not nearly as well known as your pal Simon."

"I didn't know he was well known," Jan muttered wretchedly. "He doesn't brag about his successes like Christopher."

"Well, naturally not if he's amusing himself by pulling the wool over your eyes," Marigold agreed. "I wonder how long he means to keep it up? What on earth do you talk about?"

"Oh . . . books and things."

Marigold exchanged a glance with her mother. "Look, let's have a cast-iron check on this," she suggested. "I suppose it's possible that there are two Simon Websters who look pretty much alike. Perhaps Sue was a bit tiddly last night and didn't get a really close look at *your* Simon. I seem to remember a piece about *the* Simon in *The Queen* some time

ago. Where do you put our old magazines, Jan? In the stair cupboard? I'll see if I can dig it out."

When she had gone, Leila Meldrum said, "This whole business is most extraordinary, Jan. Why didn't you tell us you were seeing this man? Why be so secretive?"

"I didn't mean to be. It's just that . . . that you're all so busy that you aren't usually interested in what I do," Jan answered, in a low voice.

"Oh, really, darling! You make us sound most unpleasant. Of course we are interested," her mother said indignantly. "It's you who seem uninterested in our affairs. You always hide yourself away when anyone comes to the house and, when you do appear, you seldom have a word to say for yourself."

Jan sighed. It was useless to argue with her mother on that point.

"What puzzles me is why he should single you out," Leila continued. "He must have scores of friends and a very full social life. I quite see that it would have amused him to find you'd virtually never heard of him, but I certainly wouldn't have supposed that you had anything in common. I don't want to be unkind, darling – I'm very fond of you and I daresay you can't help being so shy – but you are scarcely the type to appeal to a man of the world. What did you wear last night?"

"I bought a new dress," Jan said miserably.

"Thank heaven for that. I thought you might have worn that old white thing you had for your eighteenth birthday. When are you seeing him again?"

At this point, Marigold reappeared with a dog-eared copy of *The Queen* which she had folded back at the theatre page.

"I've found it," she said. "There – is that him?"

Jan looked at the photograph which appeared at the top of the page. It showed Simon sitting at a desk against a background of closely packed bookshelves. There was a typewriter in front of him and a number of books and papers, and he was leaning back in the chair with a pipe and

pouch in his hands and an expression of slightly sardonic amusement on his face.

"Well?" Marigold prompted.

Jan pushed the magazine away. "Yes, that's him," she said dully. Then, before they could question her further, she brushed past her sister and ran upstairs to her room.

The next few days were hard for her to bear. She could see, all too clearly, that her family were right in surmising that Simon had been diverted by her failure to recognise him, and had found it mildly amusing to masquerade as an ordinary office worker of limited means. Linda, not knowing that Jan was in earshot, had suggested to the others that he might be writing a play with a shy mouse-like girl in it and was using Jan as "copy." Whatever his motives for deceiving her, Jan thought forlornly, the episode had come to an abrupt end. Even if he had liked her a little, there was no future in their friendship. They were as far apart as people living on different planets and, now that she knew who he was, she was as nervous of him as of any other celebrity.

The following week-end, Linda announced her engagement to a suave young man who was heir to a considerable fortune.

In the excitement attending this most desirable match, the Meldrums forgot about what they had called "Jan's bomb-shell."

Jan, listening to the plans for the wedding, which was to take place in three months' time so that the couple could combine their honeymoon with a business trip to the States, could not help wondering if Linda was really in love with Mark Cromer, or if she was attracted by the life he could give her. It seemed to her that her sister's attitude to her fiancé, although admiring and affectionate, was not that of a girl wholeheartedly and unreservedly in love. However, if Linda's emotions left something to be desired, it was plain that Mark was madly in love with her sister, and they were undoubtedly very well matched in other respects.

On the Monday afternoon following the engagement, Jan

was tidying her bedroom when she heard the telephone ringing. There was an extension in her parents' room and she sat on the side of their bed to take the call. She recognised Simon's voice immediately and tensed, her heart beginning to pound.

"You sound as if you have a cold," he said, when she answered.

"No. I'm very well," she said stiffly.

"Good. Are you free tonight?"

She hesitated. "I'm sorry — no. We're having some people to dinner."

"Oh — too bad. Tomorrow night, then?"

"No, I can't manage that either, I'm afraid."

There was a pause before he said, "Well, when are you free?"

Jan's fingers tightened on the receiver. "I — I really don't know. I'm rather booked up at the moment," she said carefully. And then, because there was no point in prevaricating, "I've found out who you are, Simon. So you see there's no point in . . . in playing the game any longer. Good-bye."

Without waiting to hear his reply, she snapped the receiver back on the rest and buried her face in her hands. She felt cold and shivery and very much as if she were coming down with 'flu again.

Presently she dragged herself off the bed and went back to her room. For several minutes she continued to dust and tidy, and then suddenly she went to the tallboy and opened the bottom drawer. Under several layers of garments was an envelope and, in it, the photograph of Simon which she had cut out of the magazine and kept. She looked at it for a moment and then, with an almost savage movement, she tore it into small pieces and dropped them in the waste paper basket. Then, flinging herself on the bed, she buried her face in the counterpane and burst into tears.

She could cut Simon off on the telephone, but she couldn't shut him out of her mind because she knew that, like the

simpleton her family thought her, she had fallen deeply and despairingly in love with him.

It must have been about half an hour later that the doorbell rang. Supposing that the caller was the worker for the N.S.P.C.C. who had slipped a donation envelope through the letter box earlier in the week, Jan slid off the bed and hastily pulled a comb through her tumbled hair.

But it was not a charity collector who stood in the porch. It was Simon. Without giving her a chance to speak, he walked straight into the hall and closed the door.

"So you've found out. I was afraid of that," he said evenly.

Conscious that her dress was crumpled from lying on the bed and that the state of her face must betray that she had been crying, Jan turned her back on him and said in a choked voice, "Please go away. I don't want to see you."

"Won't you even listen to an explanation?"

She shook her head. "It isn't necessary. I know why you did it. Now please go."

"No, damn you, I won't go. You're going to listen to me," he said angrily, and grabbing her arm, he hauled her across the hall and through the door of the drawing-room, which had been left ajar giving a glimpse of the fire.

Struggling and protesting, Jan found herself dumped in a chair and held down by an iron hand on her shoulder.

"You're a fool," Simon said roughly. "How can you know why I did it? How did you find out?"

She fumbled for a handkerchief and blew her nose, keeping her head bent in the hope that he would not see the tear stains on her cheeks and the deplorable condition of her eyelids.

"A — a friend of my sister's saw us at the Fandango and recognised you," she said stiffly.

"Yes, I shouldn't have taken you there — but I thought it was fairly safe," he said.

He had relaxed his grip on her shoulder and with a quick movement she jumped up and went to the window.

"You must have found it very amusing," she said, in a hard tone. "The famous, popular, successful Simon Webster taking pity on a half-baked little nobody. You're almost as good an actor as you are a playwright, Mr. Webster, but you must have been very bored with your normal amusements to bother with me for so long. No wonder you cut that woman at the Fandango. I suppose you were embarrassed at being caught out with such an uninteresting companion."

"I cut her because I didn't want you to find out who I was before I had a chance to tell you myself," he said evenly. "You don't really believe I was trying to make a fool of you, do you? Well – do you?"

Jan twisted her handkerchief between unsteady fingers. "What other reason could you have?" she asked shortly.

She heard him cross the room and knew that he was standing close behind her, but he did not try to touch her.

"I asked you once why you were afraid of your family's clever friends. You said that, if I were someone who was fairly successful and well known in their particular field, you would feel the same about me – remember? I wanted you to get over that stage before you discovered that I had had some success in the theatre," he said quietly.

Jan did not answer him, and there was a long silence before he went on, "Many people dream of being successful, Jan. But achieving success is like having a great deal of money. It can make life smoother, but it also makes one suspect people's motives. Are they real friends, or are they more interested in one's possible usefulness to them? I didn't tell you how I earned my living because I wanted you to be yourself with me – and to be myself with you. Can't you understand that?"

She swallowed. "But – but you lied to me. You said you were a personnel officer."

"No, you assumed that, my dear," he corrected gently. "I said that I dealt with people and their problems. It's true. Plays are about people and their difficulties."

She watched a delivery van passing in the street. "But

why should you want to – to be friends with me?” she asked, very low. “Our lives are so different. I don’t fit into your world.”

“That is why – because you aren’t a part of my world, as you call it,” he replied gravely. “You don’t know anything about the intrigues and jealousies and petty motives which make up ninety per cent of my world. You’re young and sweet and you mean what you say.”

She let him turn her round, but kept her head down, ashamed of the state of her face.

“Friends again?” he asked.

“I – I suppose so.”

“You don’t sound too sure.” He tipped up her chin and saw the shimmer of tears on her cheeks. “You’ve been crying.”

“Not really. I was angry with you,” she said, trying to sound careless and not succeeding.

He smiled down at her. “Do you always cry when you’re angry?” he asked, with gentle mockery.

Jan blushed vividly. “W – would you like some tea?” she asked hurriedly.

He laughed. “I suppose you want an excuse to powder your nose. You look very sweet as you are, but powder it if you must. No, wait a minute.”

She had tried to disengage herself from his hold, but he made her stay still. And then, taking her by surprise, he bent his head and brushed his lips against hers.

“Now run and make some tea – and be quick about it,” he said teasingly.

It was a quarter of an hour before she returned to the drawing-room with the tea tray and found Simon dipping into a book which someone had left on the sofa.

“Are you really engaged tonight?” he asked, as she poured out.

“Yes – but I’m free tomorrow,” she said shyly, another wave of colour suffusing her face and throat as she thought of that light, almost brotherly kiss.

"Would you like to go dancing again, or shall we have a quiet dinner at my flat?"

"I'd like to see your flat."

"Right. I'll fetch you about seven. Incidentally, what did your people say when they discovered I'd been taking you out?"

"They thought it very funny – that I hadn't realised who you were," she added.

"They didn't forbid you to have anything more to do with me?"

"Oh, no! Why should they?" she asked, surprised.

He shrugged. "They might well have disapproved of the disparity in our ages."

"I think they've forgotten all about it now. My sister has just got engaged to Mark Cromer – perhaps you know him – and my mother is busy planning the wedding," she explained.

"I see. Will you tell them you're dining with me tomorrow?"

She busied herself with the teapot. "I expect so," she said, knowing it was untrue and fearing that he would sense this. "They couldn't understand why you were staying in such an uninteresting seaside village," she went on quickly.

"The popular conception of a playwright being a chap who idles in the sun at Nassau or Monte Carlo," he said drily. "I'm afraid I can't concentrate in such rarefied atmospheres. When I get a good idea, I drive around the country till I find a quiet spot where I can mull it over for a couple of weeks without distractions."

"Were you planning a new play while you were staying at the Lord Nelson?" she asked.

He grinned. "That was what I'd had in mind. Then you appeared and I decided to relax instead."

"I've only seen one of your plays – *Storm Cloud*," she said.

"What did you think of it?"

"It was wonderful. Actually I went to see it because Venetia Farr was in it," she admitted. "She's such a wonder-

ful actress — and so incredibly beautiful. Of course you know her quite well, I suppose. Is she as nice as she looks?"

"I don't think I would apply the word 'nice' to her," he said, after a moment. "As you say, she is a very accomplished actress and she has . . . great charm."

"Did you see her new film, *The Shadows Behind Us*?" Jan asked.

He shook his head.

"Perhaps you'll be able to catch it at one of the suburban cinemas," she suggested. "I think it's the best she's made. She's married to an American producer now, isn't she?"

"I believe so." He stood up. "I must go. I have some work to do."

Jan accompanied him to the door and as he turned to say good-bye she said, "I shall be out till quite late tomorrow, so it would really be better if I took a taxi to your flat instead of you calling for me here. I don't know your address."

He gave her a rather searching look, but told her the address without comment.

"Oh — is that your car?" she asked, seeing the sleek grey Jaguar which was parked a few yards down the street.

"Yes. I'm afraid that ramshackle jalopy which I drove last time was part of the deception. You seemed to think I was pretty hard up, and I thought if I turned up in this it might arouse your suspicions that I wasn't quite what I pretended to be," he admitted with a twinkle.

"Which, of course, you weren't," she said, a shade wryly.

When he had gone, she collected their tea-tray and carried it out to the kitchen. It was time to start preparing the meal for her parents' guests, and, as she wrapped a large white cooking apron round her slim waist and pushed up the sleeves of her jersey dress, she wondered if she had been a fool to agree to see Simon again. Now that he had explained his reasons for concealing his identity, she no longer felt bitter and humiliated. But, although he might like her and find her an undemanding and restful companion, she knew it was beyond all possibility that he should ever fall in love

with her. Was it asking for heartbreak to continue to meet him? Or was the proverbial half-loaf really better than nothing?

It was fortunate that the dishes which her mother had chosen were all familiar to her, as her thoughts were far away from the kitchen while she worked. She wondered if it was very wrong of her to have decided not to tell the family that she was going to see Simon again. But, if they knew, they would expect her to bring him to the house, and she guessed that he had had more than enough of being lionised. Besides, they would never understand why he bothered with her, and it would either become a joke among them or else they would be afraid of her succumbing to his charm and getting hurt. Which is probably exactly what will happen. Jan thought wearily. But it's too late to retreat now.

The following evening, on the pretext of going to visit one of her former college friends, Jan left the house and caught a bus which would take her quite near to Simon's flat. The lie weighed on her conscience as she sat in the bus and watched the traffic ahead, but her guilt was mingled with excited anticipation.

The flat was part of a large block of service apartments built since the war.

A porter in dark green livery took her up to the top floor by lift and indicated the door at the far end of a long, marble-paved landing. There was a big gilded looking glass opposite the head of the staircase, and Jan paused to check her make-up before ringing the bell. She was wearing a light wool coat and, under it, a white cashmere shirt and a full skirt of soft coral mohair with a broad belt of matching leather. She hoped she had been right in assuming that Simon would not expect her to wear a formal dinner dress.

She had to wait a few moments before he answered the door and stood back to let her pass into the small hall.

"I can't guarantee the quality of the food they're sending up," he said, taking her coat. "I get all my meals from the restaurant downstairs and the cooking varies a bit."

"Don't you have a . . . a valet or anything?" she asked.

He laughed. "God forbid! I'm quite capable of dressing myself, you know, and cleaning is part of the service. Come and have a drink. What do you like? Sherry? Martini?"

"Sherry, please."

While he poured out the drinks, she looked round the large sitting-room. It was like one of the elegant contemporary interiors which were photographed in the glossy magazines. The whole of one wall was made of glass and had doors at either end which gave on to a flagged terrace. The wall facing her, which enclosed the fireplace, was built of blocks of stone, and the other walls were hung with dark grey slubbed linen and ranged with groups of pictures in white shadow-box frames. The floor was of polished parquet, but between the two four-seater tweed-covered sofas at right angles to the hearth was a tan-and-white cowhide rug.

"Do you like it?" Simon asked, arching an eyebrow at her from the cocktail cabinet.

Jan hesitated, taking in the streamlined functional design of the furniture and the few expensive-looking and carefully placed ornaments, each of which was lit by a small concealed bulb. It was, she thought, a curiously impersonal room – a cold room, in spite of the central heating. The lights behind the ornaments and above the pictures reminded her of art galleries and museums, an impression heightened by the expanse of glossy floor and the big plate-glass window.

Aloud, she said politely, "It's very . . . elegant."

He grinned. "That's tactful of you – but unnecessary. I'm not responsible for the fittings. I imagine one of these professional decorators dreamed them up."

"You don't like it?" she queried.

"Do you?" He set their glasses on a low table by the artificial log fire and lit a cigarette.

"It's too grand for me. I shouldn't dare to leave anything lying about. Why do you live here if you don't really care for it?"

He shrugged. "It's a roof over my head, and the view of

the park is quite pleasant. I'm out a good deal, anyway."

Jan sat down on one of the sofas and sipped her sherry. "I'm not sure what I'd like for a place of my own," she said thoughtfully. "Linda's having a flat rather like this, but I think I should prefer a little house with a garden. Flats always remind me of hotels. They never seem really homely."

He asked her when her sister was getting married, and if she liked her prospective brother-in-law.

"Yes, very much. He pretends to be rather blasé and world weary, but I think it's only an affectation – and he obviously adores Linda."

"Does she adore him?"

Jan frowned. "I don't know. It's difficult to tell what she feels. She's never been very demonstrative. I hope she does – it would be awful if she wasn't happy with him. I – I sometimes wonder if his being so rich makes her think she's fonder than she is."

"A wealthy suitor is quite a temptation to any woman, I imagine," he said drily.

"Oh, no! I don't think money should have anything to do with marriage," Jan declared earnestly.

"Well, I suppose you're still young enough to find the idea of love in a garret highly romantic," he said teasingly.

"I don't know about love in a garret," she answered seriously, "but I certainly don't think that having a . . . a flat like this, for instance, has anything to do with happiness."

"What, in your opinion, is the formula for wedded bliss?" he asked, with a twinkle.

"Just love, I suppose. Wanting to be with someone in any circumstances."

He took her empty glass and filled it. "Yes, at your age that's what I thought, too," he said, in an odd tone. "But experience teaches one that there are some circumstances which can't be accepted."

A tap at the door heralded a waiter pushing a trolley covered with a spotless damask cloth. While the man was

laying the table near the window, Jan got up to look at Simon's books, and during the meal they discussed more general topics.

Afterwards they listened to some long-playing records, one of these being of music from a new Broadway show.

"What a lovely song," Jan said, as the final number on the record came to an end.

Simon adjusted the needle to play it a second time and held out his hands to her. As they danced, she closed her eyes, wishing that the music would never end, that this moment of perfect happiness could last for ever. Remembering what had happened the last time she had been in his arms, her pulses quickened and she wondered if he would kiss her again. Perhaps he read her thoughts, for when she opened her eyes and glanced up at him, there was a hint of a smile round his firm mouth. The possibility that he might guess she wanted him to kiss her made her step back quickly as soon as the number finished and move away from him.

Yet, a little while later, when he suggested taking her home, she felt a pang of disappointment.

It would have been too much to hope that her family would forget about Simon altogether, and a few days later, when the novelty of Linda's engagement had worn off slightly, Mrs. Meldrum asked: "Have you seen any more of Mr. Webster, Jan?"

They were at the dining-table, and fortunately Jan had just put a spoonful of lemon junket in her mouth, which saved her from having to reply immediately. By a strong effort of will, she managed not to change colour.

"He rang me up last week. I told him I didn't want to see him again," she said presently, without expression. At least she had not been forced to lie again.

Her elders exchanged glances, and Marigold said laughingly, "Poor Jan. It was really rather mean of him to lead you up the garden like that. What did he say when you told him you'd found out?"

"I don't know. I rang off. If you don't mind, I'd rather not talk about it," Jan said in a taut voice. She kept her eyes on her plate, but she knew they were passing meaning looks again.

On Sunday, again on the pretext of spending the day with a girl friend, she went out with Simon. It was not until they were on the outskirts of London that he told her he was taking her to lunch with some friends who lived in Surrey.

"You'll like them," he said. "They've nothing to do with the theatre. Ben is an architect and Paula has her hands full with a couple of kids."

"Do they know you're bringing me?" she asked anxiously, disappointed that they would not be alone all day.

"Yes, I fixed it up last night," he said, letting the car out as the road stretched clear ahead of them.

Jan turned her head to look at him, noticing the flecks of grey in the hair above his ears and the strong line of his jaw. His nose was very slightly crooked – perhaps the result of a schoolboy scrap, she thought – and she reflected that he was the type of man who would not look affected with a beard. She wondered why a certain composition of features should add up to attractiveness, while another, almost the same, did not. Simon was not conventionally handsome, but his face suggested those qualities which a man ought to have – strength allied to gentleness, and humour and honesty.

"Are you counting my grey hairs?" he asked suddenly, catching her out.

She coloured and looked away. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to stare."

"I've already done the same to you," he said. "I discovered that your eyes are a mixture of green and gold and that you have nine freckles on your nose and a small scar on your right temple."

"I fell off a bicycle when I was ten," she said, "and my eyes are a very ordinary shade of hazel – and I've only eight freckles on my nose."

He glanced sideways at her and something in his expres-

sion made her heart lurch. "Eight or nine — it's a very engaging little nose," he said teasingly.

They reached his friends' house a little before one, and Jan took an immediate liking to Ben Davison, a short stocky man with grizzled hair and a kind weather-beaten face. His wife, he explained, was busy in the kitchen and would join them presently.

Their two children, a sturdy pigtailed little girl of four and a podgy son of eighteen months, were playing in the comfortable, shabby sitting-room, which was also occupied by a somnolent black spaniel, a Siamese kitten, a hamster in a cage and a talkative budgerigar.

Ben offered Jan a glass of sherry and poured beer for himself and Simon. Presently his wife appeared, and as she shook hands Jan saw her exchange a glance with her husband. At first, Paula Davison seemed rather reserved, although she was obviously very fond of Simon. During lunch she was occupied with keeping an eye on her son, who sat in a high chair beside her, and left most of the conversation to the others. But afterwards she accepted Jan's offer to help with the washing-up, and chatted so pleasantly that Jan decided she had been mistaken in reading a certain coolness into her manner.

"I thought of showing Jan the ruins, and I know you like to doze for an hour on Sunday afternoons, Ben," Simon said, when the two women returned from the kitchen.

"Go ahead, old chap," Ben said affably. "You might take Porter with you. Time he got some of his fat off." He stirred the drowsing spaniel with his foot.

"Do you fancy a walk, Paula?" Simon asked.

Their hostess shook her head. "No, I want to finish this dress for Polly's birthday party next week," she said. "You two go ahead. Tea is at five, but it looks as if it might rain, so you'll probably be back before then. Have you both got macs, or can we lend you ours?"

The ruins to which Simon had referred were the crumbling remains of a mediaeval abbey about two miles across

country. Although, to the east, the sky did look threatening, it was still clear overhead and the sun was shining as they set out.

"The ruins aren't very spectacular, but I know Ben likes to sleep off his lunch so I thought we'd leave them in peace for a couple of hours," Simon said. "Do you like them?"

"Yes, very much – and the children are darlings," Jan said warmly, wishing her legs were longer. Simon's easy stride made it necessary for her to walk her fastest, and poor, fat Porter was lumbering at their heels with alarming wheezes.

"You like kids?" Simon asked.

"Not always – but I'd like to have some of my own one day. Have you any brothers or sisters?"

He shook his head. "My mother died when I was born and my father never married again. He was killed years ago and I lived with relatives until I was old enough to be independent. Sorry, am I going too fast for you?"

He slackened his pace and, after a moment, took her hand in his. The touch of his warm, dry fingers sent a tremor of pleasure up her arm.

They came to the ruins through a small spinney of birch trees. There was not much left of the abbey, just a few ragged walls half-hidden by ivy and a well surrounded by a safety railing.

While Simon sat on a tree-stump and smoked a cigarette, Jan and the dog wandered about the site. Jan wondered what the abbey had been like in its heyday, and felt that some of the calm serenity of monastic life seemed to linger there. She was contemplating the remains of an arched doorway when she felt the first drops of rain on her face, and a moment later Simon appeared and remarked that they had better find somewhere to shelter.

"I think it will be only a shower. The heavier clouds seem to be moving westwards," he said.

Where the highest remaining walls formed a corner, ivy had grown across the angle and formed a small canopy. They stood under this with Porter snuffing their feet and listened

to the rain pattering on the leaves.

"There should be a rainbow soon. The sun is still shining," Jan said.

Simon leaned against the mossy stones beside her, his hands in his pockets, his expression withdrawn and unreadable. Presently the rain fell more heavily and the outer edge of their ivy roof began to leak. Simon put his arm round Jan's shoulders and drew her back against the wall.

"Sorry about this. Maybe it wasn't such a good idea to come out," he said.

"I don't mind. The earth always has such a lovely smell when it's raining. Oh, look — there's the rainbow!"

She pointed upwards to the great arch of delicate colour beyond the trees. Then, watching it, she became aware that his hand had tightened on her shoulder and that he was not looking at the sky. A lump rose in her throat and her heart began to beat with slow laboured thumps. The next moment he had turned her into his arms and his lips were on hers.

It seemed a long time later that he said softly, close to her ear, "It's stopped raining. We'd better get back."

Jan opened her eyes and looked at the lapel of his tweed jacket. She felt dazed and a little dizzy and agonisingly shy.

Walking back to the spinney, she tried to muster the courage to look at him, but she was afraid of what she might see in his face. They were half-way back to the house before she dared to steal a swift glance at him, only to find that his expression gave nothing away. Whatever he was thinking, it did not show. Neither of them spoke until they reached the gate, which Simon swung open for her, saying, in a perfectly normal voice, "We've made it just in time. The heavens are going to open in a moment."

Paula met them at the door and was surprised that they were not wet. Following her into the sitting-room, Jan felt sure that what had occurred among the ruins must be written all over her. She could still feel the pressure of Simon's lips on her mouth, and the touch of his fingers in her hair.

After tea, Simon went upstairs to talk to Ben while he bathed the baby and Paula sewed the mother-of-pearl buttons on her daughter's party frock.

"Have you known Simon long?" she asked, glancing at Polly who was absorbed in putting her doll to bed in a miniature Moses basket.

Jan explained how she had come to meet him. "But you've known him for several years, haven't you?" she ended.

"Seven, to be exact. We were spending a holiday in the wilds of Scotland and Simon had rented a cottage in the village to write his first play. He and Ben got together in the pub in the evenings. When the play was such a success, we wrote to congratulate him and then, a few weeks later, he dropped in on us. He's been coming here regularly ever since. I suppose we provide a complete change from his normal milieu."

"Or a home instead of a service flat," Jan said, half to herself.

Paula gave her a searching look. Then she said frankly, "You're not at all what I expected, you know."

"What did you expect?"

The older girl lifted her shoulders. "An actress, probably. Someone sophisticated and ambitious." She paused to thread her needle. "That was rather stupid of me, of course — but men can be such fools about women." She bent to her sewing basket for scissors. "Especially Simon's type," she said in an odd tone.

Jan was about to ask her what she meant by this afterthought when the telephone rang, and when Paula came back from the hall, it was time to take Polly upstairs. Listening to the child saying her prayers, Jan felt a pang of envy for the Davisons' life together. Ben would probably never scale the professional heights which her father had attained, and when the children were old enough for school Paula would doubtless fill her time with morning coffee and Townswomen's Guild activities: but, humdrum as they might seem to her family, they had all that Jan wanted from

life — love, a home, and the contentment of simple pleasures.

On the drive back to London, Jan wondered what had been behind Paula's cryptic remarks about Simon. To Jan, Simon seemed a most unlikely person to be foolish about women. She was inclined to think that he might be exceptionally shrewd about her sex. Now that they were alone again, she felt awkward and self-conscious, and was glad when he switched on the radio so that it was not necessary to make casual small talk. They were back in town by half past nine, but instead of taking her home he drove to his flat.

"Your people aren't expecting you back at any set time, are they?" he asked, parking the car.

She shook her head.

"Come up for a cup of coffee," he said.

She hesitated, wondering if she ought to refuse. But he was already out of the car and walking round the bonnet to open the door for her.

In the flat, he helped her out of her coat and then disappeared into the small kitchenette. Jan sat on the edge of the couch and tried to stifle her qualms. Was it possible that, with her limited experience of men, she had allowed his attraction for her to warp her judgment? Had he brought her up here to make love to her because, for the time being, her *naïveté* appealed to him? But surely if he was the sort of man who made a game of love he would not be so friendly with people like the Davisons?

By the time he came back with the coffee she was stiff with nerves and almost ready to jump up and run. Then the matter-of-fact way in which he poured out the coffee and asked if she wanted anything to eat steadied her.

"Paula was telling me how they met you," she said. "Were you surprised when your play was accepted — or were you sure it was going to be a success?"

"I hoped it might be," he said, smiling. "I'd been working on the idea for a couple of years before I started writing it. Of course there's the devil of a lot of luck in these things. Dozens of equally good plays get turned down because suit-

able actors aren't available, or there isn't a theatre free, or because nobody feels inclined to risk their money on the work of an unknown." He broke off. "I don't believe you've heard a word I've said," he said quizzically.

Jan replaced her cup in the saucer with a slight rattle.

"Yes, I did. You were explaining—" she began.

He took the cup and saucer away from her, set them on the table and sat down beside her, his hands closing on her waist.

"Is this what you're afraid of?" he asked quietly.

She tensed, two spots of colour burning in her cheeks. But even as he touched her she knew that nothing mattered but the delight of being held in his arms, of feeling his kisses on her lips.

Some time later, putting her gently away from him, Simon got up from the couch and walked over to the window. He stood there for so long, his back to the room, that Jan began to wonder if her surrender to his embrace had disgusted him. A wave of shame washed over her. Then, abruptly, he swung round and came back to the couch, looking down at her with an expression she could not fathom.

"Don't you think it's time I declared my intentions?" he asked gravely.

Her cheeks grew hot. "I didn't suppose you had any," she said, in a low voice.

"No: I can see you are a girl to whom a few kisses are of very little consequence," he said drily. And then, in a different tone: "Oh, Jan, you little idiot — you must have a very poor opinion of my morals if you believe that I'd bring you up here and make love to you just for the devil of it."

She reached for her bag and fumbled with the clasp. "Why not?" she asked, in a voice not perfectly steady. "People do. I needn't have come. I — I'm not a child, Simon."

"Nor a bold young hussy well able to take care of herself," he said coolly. "Come here."

Slowly she rose and went to him, forcing herself to meet the mockery in his narrowed grey eyes.

"Close your eyes," he ordered.

She obeyed and felt him touch her left hand

"Now open them."

She did so. He was still holding her left hand, and, looking down at it, she drew in a sharp breath of astonishment. On her third finger, its facets catching and reflecting the light in a blaze of molten gold, was a square-cut topaz surrounded by seed pearls.

"There! Does that make you feel less like an abandoned woman?" he asked drily.

Jan blinked at him incredulously. "B – but that's my engagement finger!" she said, in a whisper.

"That's right. You're going to marry me," he said calmly. "Well, you are, aren't you?"

She swallowed, mute with stupefaction.

"Oh . . . *Simon*! Do you really m-mean it?" she stammered at last.

"I was beginning to wonder if I'd let myself in for a royal rebuff," he said, his lips twitching. "I rather thought you'd like to be my wife – but perhaps I've been flattering myself."

"Oh, no! No, I'd *love* to be your wife," she said vehemently. "It's just that I never imagined – I didn't dream –"

"Which proves that you're not very bright, my sweet. I was going to ask you at the abbey this afternoon, but then I decided that I'd want you to myself for a while."

"You mean you've had this in your pocket all day?" she asked delightedly, looking at the beautiful ring as if she could still not believe what it signified.

"All week," he corrected. "I hope you like it. We can easily change it if you don't care for the stone."

"Oh, no! It's perfect! I wouldn't think of changing it," she said indignantly. "Oh . . . I just can't believe it." A shadow drove the glow from her face. "But, Simon – are you *sure*? I mean, you oughtn't to marry just anyone. You need a wife who will be an asset to you. I – I'm so ordinary."

"Not to me," he said crisply. "If anyone is open to criticism, it's not you, my sweet child. Instead of having these

absurd doubts about your eligibility, you might consider what your parents are likely to think of me."

"What do you mean? *They* won't mind. They'll be delighted," she said, with conviction.

"Will they? I'm sure they'd much prefer you to marry some promising lad of your own age," he said drily.

"Oh, that's silly. I think they probably wonder if I shall ever get married to anyone," she admitted frankly, "that is, anyone they can approve of. When they hear about us, they'll pass out with shock and then they'll be overjoyed."

"Do you want to tell them tonight? Shall I come in with you?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Can't it be our secret — just for a little while? I still feel as if I'm having a heavenly dream and that I may wake up and find it's all my imagination."

"Shall I convince you?" He pulled her close and tilted up her face. "Sweet funny little Jan — I hope I can make you happy," he said, against her cheek.

"You have — you are! Oh, darling Simon, I do love you so!" Her arms slipped round his neck and she clung to him. "Thank goodness I caught 'flu. If I hadn't, this would never have happened to me."

She felt him laugh soundlessly for a moment, and then his lips brushed the curve of her cheek and found her mouth.

As she gave herself up to the rapture of his kiss, it seemed to Jan that a whole new life was beginning for her.

Simon had agreed to let her break the news to the Meldrums in her own way, and suggested that she should telephone him the following evening to fix a suitable time to present him to her family. But, although Jan did not wear her engagement ring the following morning, she was so deliriously happy that the others could scarcely fail to notice the change in her.

"My God! Songs at this hour! What on earth's the matter with you this morning?" growled Alistair, as she carolled

round the kitchen. "Look out! You're burning the old man's bacon."

A few minutes later, just as her father was complaining that the bacon had been grilled to a crisp, Linda came in with a florist's long, white box.

"Really, Mark is crazily extravagant," she said, a shade smugly, unfastening the silver tape and lifting the lid to reveal a dozen palest yellow roses on a bed of moistened moss. Then, as she took out the envelope tucked among the stems, her jaw dropped. "There must be some mistake! This is addressed to you, Jan," she said blankly.

Jan took the envelope and slipped out the card. A delicate colour stained her face as she read what was written on it.

"No, there's no mistake. They are for me," she said, slipping it into her pocket.

"But who on earth would send you hot-house roses?" Linda said, amazed. "Why, they cost a small fortune."

Jan repressed a desire to giggle. "Don't you think that's my business, darling?" she said, in a fair imitation of the haughty manner which her sisters sometimes adopted.

By mid-morning she found that she could hardly wait to see their faces when she made her announcement. Just before lunch she slipped upstairs and put the ring on her finger, holding it against her cheek for a moment, her eyes shining. Simon had bought the stone in Rio de Janeiro on his voyage round the world, and even by daylight it glowed with golden fire — like crystallised sunlight, she thought fancifully, spreading her hand to admire it.

With the exception of Alistair and Linda, all the Mel-drums came home for lunch that day. Nothing happened until half-way through the main course, when her mother, in the act of pouring out some water, suddenly gave a shriek and nearly dropped the jug.

"Jan! Where did you get that ring?" she demanded sharply.

At once all eyes focused on Jan's left hand.

"Simon gave it to me," Jan said calmly. "More sprouts, Father?"

"Who the devil is Simon?" her father asked.

"Simon Webster — you know, the playwright. I thought Mother would have told you we were friends," his daughter said demurely.

"You don't mean that . . . that . . ." Leila broke off, her hand to her cheek.

Jan helped herself to gravy. "He's asked me to marry him, and I've accepted," she said steadily. "I know I should have told you that I've been seeing him again, but I didn't because . . . well, because I didn't think you would understand it."

Mrs. Meldrum closed her eyes for a moment and then opened them and said faintly, "I don't believe it. I simply don't believe it. If this is your idea of a joke, Jan, it's hardly —"

Jan paled slightly and there was a sparkle of anger in her eyes.

"Why shouldn't it be true?" she asked evenly. "I may be the ugly duckling of the family and not very intellectual or witty — but I'm not so repulsive that no one will look at me. You don't even know Simon. How can you judge what he wants in a wife? I knew you'd be surprised, but I thought you'd be pleased, too. I thought you'd be glad for me." She looked round the table, her eyes appealing. "Don't you want me to be happy?" she said, a slight break in her voice.

"Yes, of course we do, my dear," her father said hastily. "It's just that this . . . this news is a complete bolt from the blue — at least it is to me."

Marigold, who had been sitting in stunned silence up to this point, leaned forward to take a closer look at the ring and said flippantly, "Well, it's no joke — unless Jan has been window-breaking at Cartiers. Frankly, sweetie, I'm staggered, but I think it's terrific. When are we going to meet your dashing beau?"

"Tonight, if you like," Jan said, grateful to her sister for attempting some shade of the conventional reaction to her

surprise. She looked at her mother, hoping that she, too, would have recovered from the initial shock and be beginning to show a degree of pleasure.

Leila Meldrum met her anxious glance and pushed back her chair.

"Darling, I'm sorry if I hurt you," she said, coming round the table and laying a hand on Jan's shoulder. "But, as Paul says, it is a tremendous shock, you know, and I do think you should have warned us. To spring it on us so suddenly — well!" She illustrated her confusion with a gesture.

"But you are pleased now, aren't you?" Jan asked hopefully.

Leila bit her lip. "I don't quite know, darling," she said slowly. "It's so — so very sudden." She went back to her chair, a troubled frown contracting her normally placid features.

"I've never met Mr. Webster," she said, sitting down. "Naturally we all know him by reputation and I've heard people talking about him." She hesitated for some seconds and then, as if making a decision, she took a breath and said, "But from what I do know I wouldn't have thought him a suitable person for you."

"Why not? What's wrong with him?" Jan asked in surprise.

"For one thing, he's so much older," her mother said.

"Only twelve years. That isn't so very much older," Jan said quickly.

"Isn't he the fellow who was mixed up with that —" her father began, stopping short as his wife directed a meaning look at him.

"With what?" Jan asked sharply.

"Oh, yes. You mean that business with —" Marigold also broke off in mid-sentence.

Leila Meldrum regarded the remains of her lunch with disfavour and folded her napkin. "Jan, has Mr. Webster ever mentioned Venetia Farr to you?" she asked.

"Why, yes, he's mentioned her. She was in his first play. Why do you ask that?" Jan said, puzzled. There was some-

thing in the atmosphere which bewildered and troubled her, a kind of suppressed tension which she was at a loss to explain.

"Is that all he's said about her?" her mother persisted.

"What do you mean? What has Venetia Farr to do with it?"

Leila thrust the napkin into its ring and leaned back in her chair, her long, sensitive fingers drumming on the arm rests. "I suppose you were still at school when it happened," she said slowly. "It was all rather a nine days' wonder. I'd almost forgotten it myself."

"Forgotten what? Look, I don't know what you're talking about," Jan said impatiently.

"Simon Webster was engaged to Venetia Farr," her mother said quietly. "The newspapers made a great fuss about it; it was just the sort of story they like, a young and good-looking playwright falling in love with his leading lady. Then, only a few days before the wedding, Venetia broke it off and flew to Hollywood. Simon disappeared for several months. No one knew where he'd gone and there were all kinds of wild rumours flying about. They said he was completely broken up by her treatment of him."

Jan was silent for a long moment. Afterwards, she did not know what prompted her to react as she did. It was like an instinctive reflex: the words seemed to come out by themselves.

"Oh, that!" she said, in a voice devoid of all expression. "Yes, I know about that, of course. It was all over years ago. It isn't as if he'd been married to her, you know. There's nothing very shameful about a broken engagement. I – I thought you were going to tell me he'd murdered someone."

They all looked at her, and she met their eyes without flinching.

"You mean, you believe he's got over her now?" Leila asked.

Jan forced herself to smile. "Well, of course," she said carelessly. "He wants to marry me. Doesn't that prove it?"

But, even as she spoke, a leaden weight seemed to replace the fountain of joy which had bubbled up inside her all that morning. For the first time – and the knowledge was like a physical blow – she realised that Simon had never actually told her that he loved her. He had held her in his arms and kissed her and given her his ring. But he had never said, “I love you.”

CHAPTER III

No one spoke for several minutes. Finally, Mrs. Meldrum said, "I suppose if you've agreed to marry him, there's little we can do about it. You're over twenty-one and don't need our permission. But I certainly feel you should give us an opportunity to get to know him before any public announcement is made. You'd better ask him to dine with us tonight. The sooner we meet him the better."

When, some time later, Jan dialled Simon's number, she found the line engaged. Waiting for it to be free, she wondered if she was being a fool to let the discovery that he had once been engaged to Venetia Farr spoil the blissful state of mind in which she had been existing for the past twenty-four hours. What if he *had* loved Venetia? She had never expected to be the first woman in his life. Any man of his age was bound to have had love affairs. Venetia was married to an American: whatever had been between them was over long ago, a closed chapter.

But how can I be sure of that? she wondered, remembering her mother's question. Is it just an accident that Simon has never said he loves me in so many words? Or has he deliberately avoided telling me something which is not and never will be true?

Sitting there by the telephone, it seemed to her that if Simon *was* still in love with Venetia – or the memory of her – it would explain everything that was puzzling about her own relationship with him. Last night, his proposal had seemed like a dream come true, something so extraordinary and wonderful that it was close to a miracle.

But, in the light of what she had since learnt, the wonder of it began to fade, and to take on a significance which drained all her joy. Now, trying to see their engagement from the dispassionate viewpoint of an outsider, she had to admit

that it was a most improbable alliance. Simon was brilliant and successful and wealthy, a most eligible *parti* who must be high on the lists of the most ambitious match-makers. She, without the reflected distinction of her family, had no claims at all to being an enviable bride. She was just an ordinary girl like thousands of others: neither ravishingly pretty nor interestingly plain, and without a single attribute to single her out from a hundred other twenty-two-year-olds.

But if Simon had loved and lost the one woman who was everything he wanted, it was within the bounds of possibility that, seeking a companion to assuage his loneliness, he would choose someone so different from Venetia that she would never remind him of what might have been.

And if that was the answer – what now? Jan buried her face in her hands and tried to discipline her conflicting thoughts and emotions. I might have known it was too heavenly to last, she thought forlornly. Nothing is ever perfect. There is always a flaw somewhere.

Presently, still hopelessly confused, she tried the number again and heard the bell ringing at the other end of the line.

As soon as he recognised her voice, Simon wanted to know how her family had taken the news, and Jan told him that they were still recovering from shock but were looking forward to meeting him.

“Thank you for the roses, Simon. They’re beautiful,” she said, when he had promised to be at the house at seven o’clock.

“I didn’t know your favourite flowers. There’s a lot I have to learn about you, my dear,” he said.

And I about you, she thought silently.

“Till seven, then, sweetheart,” he went on. “I’m just getting down to some work on the new play. Now that I have a prospective wife to support, I can’t afford to slack.”

Jan managed to laugh, but, as she replaced the receiver, her heart was heavy within her and she felt closer to tears than laughter.

Alistair and Linda were equally staggered by the news

which their mother broke to them when they reached home that evening.

"All we need now is for someone to pop the question to Marigold, and we're all set for a triple wedding," Alistair said cheerfully. He grinned at his second sister. "How does it feel to be the last one on the shelf, old thing? You'd better get cracking, or you'll find yourself doomed to spinsterdom."

Marigold ignored the jibe, but her mother said hastily, "Oh, we must get Linda's wedding over before we can contemplate anything else. Jan won't be thinking about a wedding for some time, will you, dear?"

"I don't know. We haven't discussed it yet," Jan said, without expression.

"Well, at your age, I think you should wait at least six months before setting a definite date," Leila said firmly.

"Having asked her to marry him within a few weeks of meeting her, the ardent suitor may be keen to get her tied up permanently," Alistair remarked. "Why not, indeed? There is no point in a stay of execution once the troth is plighted."

"You don't know anything about it, Alistair," his mother retorted, rather coldly. "A wedding doesn't arrange itself, let me tell you. There are a hundred and one details to be seen to."

"I can't see why, since both your darling daughters have contrived to hook men who are doing pretty well for themselves," her son observed airily. "Neither of them will have to worry about somewhere to live, for instance, Linda has a flat and the ancestral home at her disposal, and presumably Jan will be holding court to the stars of stage and screen in some lavishly appointed penthouse. Though I must say it's hard to imagine you hobnobbing with the theatrical fraternity, my child," he added, grinning at Jan. "However, since there's obviously more in you than we've ever discerned, you may be a raging success."

Jan flushed and hurried out of the room to attend to the evening meal. This morning she would not have minded Alistair's teasing, but now all her new-found confidence had

deserted her and she dreaded the evening ahead.

As she left the room she heard her mother say cuttingly: "This is no time for flippancy, Alistair. This whole affair is quite disturbing enough without your making a joke of it."

Punctually at seven, Jan heard the door bell ring and hurried to answer it. As Simon stepped into the hall and took her in his arms, she instinctively stiffened. But, as his mouth closed over hers, her resistance gave place to a pang of keenest delight and she yielded to his embrace.

"They're all in the drawing-room," she said, when he released her. "I'm afraid it's going to be a rather harrowing evening."

Simon smiled and squeezed her hand. "Never mind. It's only for an hour or two and then it'll be over for life. Happy?"

She nodded, avoiding his eyes. Then she led him across the hall and opened the door.

From the moment she said, "Mother . . . Father . . . this is Simon," and Simon walked forward to greet his prospective parents-in-law, she knew it was he, not they, who was in command of the situation.

He was so charming, so assured, so courteous, that it was impossible for them not to succumb to his magnetism. Watching him treat her brother and sisters as if they were engaging but only half-fledged entrants into adult society, Jan could not help thinking of poor George Baker and wishing he could be here to see his tormentors pleasantly but unmistakably kept in their place.

Simon's treatment of herself was all she could have asked. He did not gaze besottedly at her as Mark gazed at Linda, but his manner towards her was calculated to convey that, to him, she was wholly captivating. By the end of the meal her family were beginning to look at her with new and faintly astonished eyes.

Soon after dinner Alistair and the girls excused themselves and left the engaged couple alone with their parents. After some minutes of general conversation, Simon took advantage

of a hiatus to say, "I take it you have no objection to our making the engagement official, sir?"

"Put a notice in the paper, you mean?" Mr. Meldrum glanced at his wife. "Why, no, I don't think so! Have you anything to say on that, Leila?"

"Not if Jan is quite sure of her feelings," his wife replied guardedly.

"Are you sure, Jan?" Simon asked, smiling at her.

Jan drew a deep breath. This was the moment when she must make up her mind finally and irrevocably. There could be no going back.

"Yes, I'm sure," she said quietly.

He took her hand and lifted it to his lips. Then, with his head bent over her fingertips, it was easy to believe that he loved her as she loved him. Easy to believe — until she thought of the exquisite face of Venetia Farr and remembered the husky enchanting voice which she had so often heard on the screen.

Could any man, having once possessed so lovely and gifted a woman, forget that she had once belonged to him?

"I take it that you won't be getting married for some time?" Mr. Meldrum said presently.

"Personally, I should be delighted if Jan would agree to marry me next week," Simon said easily. "But I suppose you want all the trimmings, don't you, sweetheart?"

His use of the charming endearment kindled a glow of soft colour in her cheeks.

"I don't mind," she said shyly.

"Oh, yes, you must have a proper wedding, dear. It's the great day of a girl's life," her mother said swiftly. "Of course it will mean putting it off until Linda has been married — I really couldn't cope with two weddings at the same time — but that will give you plenty of time to get your trousseau together and plan your future. After all, you have only known each other a very short time, and an engagement is an extremely happy period of one's life."

Jan looked at Simon to see how he was reacting to this

viewpoint.

"Yes, I quite understand that arranging two marriages close together would make a great deal of work for you, Mrs. Meldrum," he said pleasantly. "But, on the other hand, I don't feel there is anything to be gained from too long an engagement." He looked at Jan. "Would you be disappointed if we had quite a small affair? You could still have your white dress and orange blossom."

"I'd much rather it wasn't a big event," she said diffidently. "But haven't you a lot of friends who will want to be there?"

"We're talking about a wedding — not a circus, my sweet," he said drily. "What would you say to getting married some time next month with just your family and the Davisons present?"

"Isn't that rushing things a bit?" her father put in.

"I don't think so, sir. I wouldn't have asked Jan to marry me if I were not reasonably confident of making her happy, and I think she knows her own mind," Simon said coolly.

"But — next month!" Mrs. Meldrum protested. "That really is much too soon." She appealed to her husband with a look which said plainly that she was appalled at such a prospect.

Jan knew that, without her support, Simon would not force the issue. Suddenly, a mood of the most reckless incaution seized her.

"I think it's a marvellous idea," she said brightly. "I would like a white dress and flowers, but I don't need hordes of guests to make me feel a bride. And a small wedding will save you so much work, Mother. You can just sit back and enjoy it. If we have only seven guests — nine if Linda brings Mark and Aunt Laura comes — the reception will be just like an ordinary tea party. I'll make my own cake and all the other eatables, and there'll be practically nothing else to do."

"Oh, but this is absurd!" her mother protested. "You can't have a hole-and-corner wedding like that. People will

think there's something peculiar about it."

"I don't think we care what other people think, Mrs. Meldrum," Simon said negligently. "Would the first of next month be a suitable date?"

"I don't see why not. Nobody has any vital engagements on that day," Jan said quickly. She was beginning to feel that everything had an unreal quality, just as if she were slightly tipsy.

"Do you mind if we have a very informal affair, sir?" Simon asked her father.

"Not in the least, my dear chap. I shall be only too glad to be relieved of spending another small fortune, which is what seems to be expected of me in Linda's case," her father replied unguardedly, before catching his wife's eye.

"Then it's all settled," Jan said, wondering if two glasses of sherry and some burgundy at dinner could have made her a little drunk. "It isn't as if I were your only daughter, Mother," she added soothingly. "You won't miss your one chance to organise a grand spectacle."

Leila Meldrum tapped a cigarette on her thumbnail and waited for her husband to light it for her. She was obviously making a strong effort to remain calm and reasonable.

"This is not a matter which can be settled in five minutes, Jan," she said, exhaling smoke. "There are other aspects to be considered besides the actual form of the ceremony itself." Her glance flickered momentarily towards Simon. "If you were several years older and had more experience of the world, I might be able to reconcile myself to such precipitate plans. But you're very young for your age, and I think you're allowing yourself to be carried away by . . . by the excitement of the moment."

"But I—" Jan began.

"No, let me finish. I'm sure you will see my point of view, Mr. Webster," Leila went on. "You're older than Jan and have a broader experience of life. I'm sure you will be willing to wait for a while in Jan's interests."

Jan held her breath. She was almost certain that, in the

face of an appeal to his integrity, Simon would bow to her mother's wishes. His eyes narrowed slightly and he did not reply at once, his glance resting speculatively on Jan and then returning to her mother.

"I'm sorry to disagree with you, Mrs. Meldrum, but, in my view, our marriage is in Jan's best interests," he said evenly. "I don't think there is anything to be gained by a long wait."

Leila bit her lip and tipped the ash off her cigarette with a gesture of irritation. The knowledge that her concern for her daughter's happiness was not entirely unmixed with anxiety as to how the household would run without her did nothing to endear Simon to her. Although he could not know that her motives were tinged with self-interest, she had an uncomfortable feeling that he was fully aware that Jan had always taken, indeed seemed to prefer, a back seat among them.

"Very well," she said, at last. "If you're both so set on this scheme, we shall have to agree to it. Believe me, I'm only concerned for Jan's welfare, Mr. Webster."

He smiled at her. "I'm sure you are – and won't you call me Simon as I'm shortly to become a member of the family?"

The rest of the evening passed more smoothly, although there was still a slight undercurrent of strain. When, at ten o'clock, Simon thanked her mother for her hospitality, Jan was relieved that nothing worse had occurred. She had been terrified that, in a last attempt to postpone the wedding, her mother might make some reference to Venetia.

In the hall, Simon put his arm round her shoulders and said cheerfully, "Well, that seems to be that. In three weeks, Janetta Meldrum will have ceased to exist and you'll be Mrs. Simon Webster."

She leaned against the solid strength of his chest. It would be so simple to say, "Do you love me, Simon?"

But even if he answered her – and it would be easy for him to parry the question with a kiss or some teasing evasion – how would she know he was not lying? Even the most honest people sometimes told lies to spare another pain, or

because nothing was to be gained and perhaps much lost by telling the bare truth.

"Lunch tomorrow?" Simon asked. "The family can manage without you occasionally, can't they?"

She thought for a moment. "Yes, I think so. I'll leave something cold for them."

"Fine. I'll pick you up at half past twelve. Good night, my dear. Sleep well." He dropped a light kiss on her forehead, and let himself out.

Early the next morning Jan went shopping. She had made most of her purchases except for stamps and a toothbrush, when her attention was caught by one of the magazines on a rack in the doorway of a newsagent's shop. It was a periodical for film fans, and on the cover was a head-and-shoulders photograph of Venetia.

Jan halted in her stride for a second, then walked quickly on. But she had gone only a few yards when she slowed again, stood staring unseeingly at the display of tools in an ironmonger's for several moments, then retraced her footsteps. Outside the paper shop once more, she looked at the picture more closely and saw that on the bottom of the cover was printed, *Stars and Their Stories – No. 3, Venetia Farr*. Finally, after some further hesitation, she went inside the shop and bought a copy.

All the way back to the house – her remaining errands forgotten – she despised herself for giving way to morbid curiosity and felt as guilty as a shoplifter. Letting herself in by the back door, she put her basket on the table and removed all the packages, leaving the magazine at the bottom. All the time she was preparing a salad lunch and baking a cake for tea, she was conscious of it lying there and knew that, by all the tenets of decent behaviour, she ought to tear it to pieces. Finally, ashamed of her weakness and yet unable to resist the temptation, she took it from the basket and began turning the pages.

The article about Venetia was on the centre pages with

several pictures of the actress, alone or in groups. Jan looked at them in turn. None included Simon. Then, her hands damp with moisture, she sat down to read the text.

There was very little mention of the star's life before she had left England for Hollywood. The writer of the article referred briefly to her training at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art and her appearances in minor roles before scoring an overnight triumph in *Storm Cloud*. Most of the story was concerned with her film successes and a description of her palatial home on Beverly Hills. When she had read it, Jan studied the picture of Venetia with her producer husband. In spite of his boyish crew cut and bow tie, it was plain that he was at least twenty years her senior. According to the article, Venetia was his third wife, and, studying his fleshy, dissipated face, Jan wondered what had induced the young and beautiful actress to marry him. Money? The fillip he could give to her career? Surely not love?

She pushed the magazine away from her, feeling a little sick. How could anyone, even the most ambitious and unscrupulous woman, have exchanged someone like Simon for that gross, elderly man? Before she went up to change she burned the magazine in the stove. But she could not destroy her sense of shabbiness and deceit at having read it. She knew she had had no right to probe into Simon's past.

He took her to lunch at one of the most fashionable restaurants in London, but she guessed that he had chosen the place to please her and would have gone somewhere quieter and less pretentious had he been alone. As they were shown to a table by windows which overlooked the river, Jan's doubts about the suitability of her plain grey suit and apricot jersey — all the other women were in elegant dresses and model hats — were overlaid by her awareness that Simon was the most personable man in the room.

"We seem to have two things to decide," he said, when a waiter had taken his order. "Where we're going to spend our honeymoon, and where we're going to live afterwards."

"Oh – but won't we live in your flat?" she asked, surprised.

"Wouldn't you like a house to furnish as you please?"

"Yes, that would be lovely – but can you afford it?" she asked doubtfully.

"I think so," he said, smiling. "I thought we might try to find somewhere farther out of town, Richmond or Hampstead, perhaps. Talking of money, I hope you realise that you're marrying a man who lives by his wits, my child. I'm reasonably affluent at the moment, but if my muse decides to desert me you may find yourself married to a crossing-sweeper."

She smiled back at him. "I'll risk that."

"What about our honeymoon? Any ideas?"

"I haven't thought of it. Where would you like to go?" she asked shyly. Then, remembering his travels, "I suppose you've been almost everywhere."

"Not quite, although I've been to most of the conventional honeymoon places like Paris and the south of France. We could go farther afield, of course, but that would mean getting married before breakfast or spending our wedding night in a plane." His mouth twitched slightly as he saw her blush, but his eyes were tender.

"How about Amsterdam?" he suggested, after a moment's thought. "It's a delightful city, and if we hire a car over there, we can make it a centre for excursions. I think you'd like the Dutch. They're a very friendly people."

"I'm sure I should. Amsterdam sounds wonderful," Jan agreed readily. So it was agreed that Simon should book seats on a flight which would allow them to have the wedding at mid-morning and reach the capital of Holland in time for dinner.

"As a matter of fact, I've heard of a house at Chiswick which might suit us," he said presently. "If you haven't to rush home, how about taking a look at it this afternoon? It's probably riddled with dry rot and woodworm, but we may as well investigate all possibilities."

Feeling that the placid backwater of her life had suddenly changed into a racing torrent which no power could stop, Jan agreed and, as soon as they had finished lunch, Simon put her into the car and set off towards Knightsbridge, collecting the keys from the house agent on the way.

Jan knew little of the part of London in which the house was situated. So she was agreeably surprised when, after turning off a main thoroughfare and passing through several side streets of ugly Victorian villas, they rounded a corner and came upon the river. On the right was a long row of houses of mainly Georgian architecture and, on the left, between the road and the river, were small private water-gardens, some of which had sailing boats under tarpaulin covers in them.

The houses varied from large merchants' homes to smaller tucked-between cottages, but they were all well kept and had a uniform elegance of design.

Most of them had gaily coloured doors and painted window-boxes or graceful white urns flanking the doorways and, with the river sparkling in the sunlight and the breeze ruffling the hedges between the water-gardens, the general impression was of a delightful oasis of old-world serenity in the midst of urban bustle.

The house at which Simon stopped the car was of medium size with an elegant Regency façade and a primrose door with a bronze lion's-head knocker. The original boot-scraper stood beside the steps and there was a beautifully scrolled fanlight. According to the agent, the premises had been vacant only a few days, the previous occupants having had to leave the country in a hurry – but for perfectly legitimate reasons, Simon explained with a grin.

Walking along the hall to the door of the principal reception room which had three large windows overlooking the riverside, Jan knew at once that this was the house of her dreams. It seemed to be in a good state of repair, and she discovered later that the kitchen and bathroom had been expensively modernised, but she loved it because it was old

and full of history and past happiness. Even the little attics on the top floor were friendly rooms, suggestive of stored apples and chests of dressing-up clothes rather than of eerie creaks and dark, cobwebbed corners.

"What do you think?" Simon asked in a non-committal tone, as they returned to the ground floor and sat on a window-seat in the sun.

"I think it's perfect! But it must be very expensive – and would it suit you?" she asked cautiously.

"Do you like it?" he persisted. "There are three flights of stairs to clean, you know, and it's not notably labour-saving, in spite of the central heating and all those kitchen fittings."

"Oh, I wouldn't mind that – a house like this deserves to be kept beautifully," she said, admiring the handsome onyx fireplace and its pine mantelpiece.

"You really like it? You could settle here happily for the next ten years or so?" he asked gravely.

She nodded. "For always. But are you sure –?"

"Right. Providing there's nothing structurally wrong with the place, we'll take it," he said decisively. "As soon as the papers are signed, you can start choosing wallpapers, and so on and looking round for furniture."

"Oh, Simon!" She leaned towards him, her lips softly parted, her eyes alight. "Do you realise that three months ago we didn't even know each other, and now we're practically married and we have this darling house?" she said dazedly.

He stood up and pulled her into his arms. "'Practically' isn't enough. I'm looking forward to the day when we are married and you're hard at work in the kitchen," he said, laughing.

And, as she lifted her face for his kiss and felt his arms tighten around her, Jan forgot about Venetia and all that had happened before they had met each other, and gave herself up to the rapture of the present.

In the following fortnight she was busier than ever before. Ben Davison had come up from the country to inspect the house for them and pronounced it remarkably sound and excellent value for the price – although when Jan discovered what Simon had paid for their future home she was horrified at his extravagance.

While striving not to neglect her family in the short time that was left to her to look after them, she spent every spare moment poring over decorating manuals and searching the big stores for precisely the right shade of heavy brocade for the drawing-room curtains and the perfect wallpaper for the master bedroom. She would have liked to do some of the decorating herself, but Simon said firmly that he did not intend to allow her to work herself to a shadow before she reached the altar, and it was arranged that tradesmen should complete all the major renovations while they were on their honeymoon.

One afternoon, while she was measuring the floors for carpets and Simon was investigating the cellar which he planned to convert into a workshop – his interest and skill in cabinet-making was one of the many things she was gradually discovering about him – she made a pot of tea and carried it down to him.

In ancient corduroys and a faded blue shirt, he looked like the Simon she had first met, and a wave of love for him swept over her. They drank the tea from two earthenware mugs which, at present, formed the entire contents of their china cupboard. And then, while Simon wrestled with the rusty lock on an old sea-chest which had been left in a corner by the previous owners, and Jan wondered whether to have a mulberry or dark green carpet in the hall, she was suddenly conscious that he had stopped his tuneless whistling and was bending over the chest with curious intentness.

“What’s the matter? Have you found a hoard of gold sovereigns?” she asked, interested.

He stood up and let the lid fall with a dull thump. “No, there’s nothing in there but some empty bottles,” he said

quickly. "Come on, let's go back upstairs. It's chilly down here." And, picking up their empty mugs, he waited for her to precede him up the stairs.

They went to the small study where Jan wanted his advice about having some bookshelves built. But as she indicated the alcove where she wanted the shelves to be she saw that he was oddly white about the mouth and was staring at the recess without seeing it.

"Darling, what's the matter? Don't you feel well?" she asked anxiously.

He shook his head slightly and gave her a queer blank look, like someone abruptly roused from deep abstraction.

"I'm all right," he said shortly. "Now, what were you saying about the shelves?"

"Simon, what is it? What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong. I was thinking about something else, that's all. What the blazes should be wrong?" he said impatiently, shaking off the hand she had laid on his arm with an almost savage movement.

Jan shrank back from the sudden fierce anger in his face.

For a moment longer his expression was cold and hostile, and then, with a smothered expletive, he reached out and caught her hands and said, "I'm sorry, child. I didn't mean to bark at you. As a matter of fact, I've got a bit of a headache. Let's leave all this for today and find something to eat, shall we?"

"Yes . . . all right. It's getting late anyway," she agreed. But, as she went to fetch her suède jacket, she could not forget that, for a fraction of time, he had looked at her almost as if he hated her.

During the tea in one of the district's cafés, he talked about a picture he had seen which he thought would look well above the drawing-room mantelpiece. But for the incident in the study Jan might have thought his manner perfectly normal. As it was, her senses heightened by the shock of his angry rebuff, she knew that it was an effort for him to talk to her at all. They had planned to go to a cinema that even-

ing, but when Jan said she felt she might have a cold coming and would he mind if she had an early night she was almost sure she saw a flicker of relief in his eyes.

When they reached her parents' house, he got out of the car and saw her to the door.

"Have you forgiven me for snapping at you?" he asked.

"Of course." She managed a cheerful smile.

"Perhaps it's just as well that you should find out what an irritable fellow I am before it's too late," he said drily. "Have a hot bath and take a couple of aspirins, sweetheart. I don't want a bride with snuffles — that's if you still want to marry me now I've shown my true colours."

She reached on tip-toe and brushed a soft kiss against his lean cheek.

"Simple Simon," she said gently. "You'll have to do more than snap to get rid of me. Good night."

But later, after she had taken his advice and had a long hot bath before climbing into bed, that sudden flash of anger continued to worry her. Why had he been angry? And why had he looked so curiously drawn, his mouth set in a hard bitter line that was completely foreign to his normally even temperament? The more she thought about it, the less she understood it.

Next morning, intending to shop for carpets, she discovered that she had left her list of measurements at the house. As she had also forgotten to count the number of stair-clips that would be needed, she decided to go back for the list, although this would mean postponing her tour of the shops until the afternoon. It was a ten-minute walk from the Underground to the riverside, and, as she walked up their road, she looked forward to the day when this would be a true homecoming.

After searching for some time, she could not find the list and wondered if, after all, she had dropped it in her bedroom the previous night. Then she remembered checking it while they were drinking tea the day before.

To her relief, it was on the cellar floor and, picking it up,

she was about to climb the steps when her glance fell on the sea-chest. On impulse, thinking that she would have to ask the workmen to dispose of it for her, she lifted the lid and looked inside. As Simon had told her, there was nothing inside but a lining of yellowed newspapers, and a few dusty wine bottles. And then, as she was about to close it again, her eye was caught by a faded headline, half-obsured by the neck of a bottle.

A sudden chill gripped her, as if a cold draught had blown through the cellar. Shivering, her face bleak, she dropped to her knees and moved the bottle aside.

BACK-STAGE ROMANCE: ACTRESS TO WED PLAYWRIGHT.

At a party at the Savoy Hotel, London, to celebrate the 200th performance of *Storm Cloud* (the dramatic success of the season since its opening at the Cockspur Theatre last autumn), the star of the show, lovely Venetia Farr, 24, last night announced her engagement to the play's author, Simon Webster. Miss Farr, wearing a Balenciaga gown of amethyst silk with a £200 diamond flashing on her left hand, made the announcement after cutting a giant cake. Later, after dancing with her fiancé until 2 a.m., she said, "I am terribly happy. We shall be getting married in six months' time when I leave the play. I have had several film offers, but Simon has just finished a new play and there may be a part in it for me." Mr. Webster — whose first success has been described as "a much-needed shot in the arm for the British theatre" by leading critics, said his second play had not yet been given a title.

Our picture shows the couple leaving the Savoy after the party.

When she had read the report, Jan moved the bottles aside to look at the photograph. Venetia looked unbelievably beautiful, her slender throat rising from a drift of white furs, jewels glittering at her ears, her lovely face radiant as

she laughed up at her companion. And Simon, distinguished and darkly attractive in evening dress, was holding her arm and looking down at her with the possessive triumph of a man who has captured a queen among women, and who is both captor and slave.

Looking at the faded picture, Jan felt a depth of despair beyond anything that had gone before. So this was why he had hurried her out of the cellar, his face a mask of pain at all the bitter-sweet memories which the headline must have woken in him.

Sick at heart, she put the bottles back and closed the lid. Then, with dragging steps, she climbed to the hall and switched off the light. The day, which had seemed so bright and promising an hour ago, was suddenly dull and cheerless. As she walked slowly back to the station, the picture in the newspaper seemed indelibly printed in her mind. She could still see every line of Venetia's exquisite profile and the blaze of the fabulous diamond on her finger as the photographer's flash-bulb had lit the darkness outside the hotel.

Sitting in the train, her eyes fixed blindly on the opposite seat, she wondered if she were mad to delude herself that she could ever make Simon happy. That he *was* still in love with Venetia was agonisingly clear. Why else should the sight of that paper have made him so white and haggard? When people broke off an engagement by mutual consent, they were saddened for a time, and then they met someone else and forgot the earlier mistake.

It was only when one side defaulted that the other person suffered the anguish of loss and went on loving, hopelessly, wanting to be free and yet unable to break the spell. That must have been how it was with Simon and Venetia. Either she had ceased to love him and had broken the engagement, or perhaps she had deliberately thrown him over for a man who was less to her taste but had more to offer. They might even have had some foolish lovers' quarrel and both been too proud to be the first to apologise. Venetia might have accepted the American in a mood of hurt and anger. Per-

haps she had encouraged him to make Simon jealous and then found herself caught in a situation from which there was no retreat.

Conjecture and surmise – surmise and conjecture. If only I *knew*, Jan thought desperately. If only I knew the truth.

When Simon came round that evening she was outwardly calm, and inwardly tormented. They went to the theatre – to study his rivals' tricks of the trade, Simon said, grinning. In the interval since their last meeting he had managed to dispel the withdrawn taciturn mood of the day before, and Jan wondered if the memory of Venetia was a constant pain or if, now that so long had passed since their separation, it was only occasionally that he ached with longing for her.

Later, back at the house, he insisted on following her into the kitchen to make two hefty slices of Welsh rarebit while she ground the coffee beans and spooned the powder into two of the French filter-cups which Alistair had brought back from his last trip to Paris.

“With your mind on chair covers and bedding, I don't think you're eating properly,” Simon said, when she protested that he might drop melted Cheddar on his trousers.

They ate in a silence that would have been companionable but for the kind of thoughts which lurked at the back of their minds, Jan thought unhappily.

Presently he held out his hands and said, “Come and sit on my knee for a while. You've been rather cool with me this evening – or do you consider that a certain degree of remoteness is proper to a well-brought-up fiancée?”

Jan flushed and, murmuring something about washing their plates, moved past him towards the sink. A moment later the dishes were back on the table and she was firmly ensconced on his knees.

Always before, his kisses had been gentle. But tonight, as he drew her close, she saw that his eyes were dark and brilliant and that there seemed to be a kind of suppressed violence in him. At first his lips were tender and coaxing, and then, suddenly, he was kissing her with a hunger that fright-

ened her with its intensity. For a moment she yielded to the passionate embrace, her pulses racing. And then, as he crushed her against him, she had a terrible conviction that she had ceased to exist for him, that she had become someone else. Venetia.

With a moan of horror, she wrenched her face aside and struggled wildly to free herself, pressing her palms against his chest with her full strength. Almost immediately he slackened his hold and she was able to jump up and retreat to the end of the table, her breath coming in short painful gasps, her lips bruised by the force of those demanding kisses.

"Jan, what is it?" His voice was husky as he stood up and took a step towards her.

"Don't touch me!"

A second later, seeing the look on his face, she could have bitten off her tongue for saying it. But the words had come out by themselves, an involuntary expression of the fear which, already, she knew to have been groundless.

"I'm sorry — I didn't mean that," she said, in a small, choked voice.

Simon turned away, rubbing a hand over his eyes. After some moments he took a glass from the draining board, filled it from the tap and drank it. Finally, when the silence between them was becoming unbearable, he turned round and said flatly, "You were right, it seems. A degree of remoteness is desirable. I'm sorry I frightened you. It won't happen again."

He began rolling down his shirt-sleeves and fastening the cuff-links, his face devoid of expression, although he was still breathing unevenly and there was a pulse working at his temple.

Automatically, Jan collected the plates and took them to the sink. Someone — probably Alistair — had left a lighted cigarette on the window-ledge. It had burned down to the filter and left a small trail of ash and a yellow smear on the tiles. Aware that, behind her, Simon was shrugging into his

jacket, she dropped the stub in the waste bin and wiped away the stain.

"I'll be off," Simon said. "Don't bother to see me out."

"Simon!" She swung round, not knowing what to say to him and yet terrified that he would leave with this dreadful gulf yawning between them.

For a long moment his face was as stiff and expressionless as that of a stranger to whom she had mistakenly called in the street. Then the hard lines of his mouth relaxed and he came to her and said quietly, "Don't look so upset, my dear. It wasn't your fault. I got a bit carried away and you gave me the drawing-room version of a thick ear. It's not a tragedy."

"But — but you don't understand," she whispered miserably.

"Don't I?" he asked softly, the old teasing note back in his voice. "Look, how many people have you kissed before me?"

"Only one. But —"

"So you aren't very used to being seized with unnecessary vigour and subjected to such a forceful demonstration of affection?" he suggested, smiling.

Jan looked up at him uncertainly. Was he really finding something amusing in the scene which had just passed — or was he trying to pass it off lightly to spare her embarrassment? Had she been cruelly wrong in what she had thought? If she had, then he must think that she didn't want to be kissed like that — and it wasn't true. If only the image of Venetia had not risen in her mind, if only Simon had told her he loved her before taking her in his arms — then, oh, then she would have gloried in his ardour, giving back kiss for kiss, her whole being vibrant with response.

"Come on, cheer up," he said gently. "You know what's the matter with us, don't you? I'm suffering from a guilty conscience because I haven't been working hard enough, and you're planning colour schemes when you should be getting your beauty sleep. We both need another holiday. Now leave those plates till the morning and hop off to bed."

Only half-reassured, she went with him to the door where he kissed her briefly on the forehead and ran down the steps to his car. Switching on the engine, he waved good night and drove smoothly away, while Jan, closing the door, wondered if Venetia would always be the shadowy despoiler of their happiness.

Although her mother and sisters had offered to advise her, Jan went alone to buy her wedding dress. If there had been more time, she would have enjoyed making it herself, but there was so much to do at their house that she had given up this project as being beyond her energies.

Her father had given her a cheque to pay for her trousseau, and, when she had protested that it represented twice the amount she would need, he had patted her shoulder and said, rather gruffly, "Must look your best on your wedding day, my dear. Go ahead and spend it on some pretty fripperies."

They had all been very sweet to her lately. Even her mother had suppressed her misgivings about the haste of the wedding, and taken a surprising interest in the house by the river and Jan's plans for furnishing it.

Before Jan went to choose her wedding dress, she had pored over the illustrations in her sisters' fashion magazines in the hope of seeing a style to suit her. But neither the brief satin sheaths nor the clouds of lace and tulle which were currently popular seemed right. On the morning of her shopping expedition she visited the bridal department of several stores without success, and by lunch time, hot and ruffled after being zipped into and extricated from more than a dozen dresses, she was beginning to wonder if she would ever find the dress she had visualised. And then, taking a short cut from Oxford Street to Piccadilly, she passed a little *boutique* with the perfect dress in the window. Mindful that the smaller the *boutique* the higher were the prices, she hesitated at the door. And then, because the dress was exactly what she wanted, she walked boldly inside and asked to try it on. The sales-girl was a friendly redhead of about her own

age and not the formidable "madam" she had feared, and when the bodice was fastened and the skirt twitched into place Jan did not need the genuine approval on the other girl's face to tell her that the dress might have been designed for her. Apart from the sleeves being a fraction too long, it needed no alteration, and having chosen a head-dress and veil she bought a day dress and a suit which were equally becoming.

By the time she returned home she had also bought a nightdress and *négligé*, boxfuls of pretty underwear, two hats and a short evening dress. She had just enough money left to pay for two or three pairs of new shoes, a new bag and some gloves and stockings.

Since the wedding was to be a family affair, Simon did not arrange a stag party the night before. Instead, he took Jan and the Davisons out to dinner and then ran the Davisons back to his flat before delivering his bride-to-be to her parents' home for the last time.

"Nervous?" he asked, as they sat in the car at the bottom of the steps before saying good night.

"A little – aren't you?" she asked shyly.

He smiled. "Not at all. Do you think I should be? Are you really a nagging virago in disguise?"

"I hope not," she said soberly. "I hope I never turn into a nagger – or one of those awful wives who thinks more of her polished floor than her family." She turned to him, her eyes anxious. "Simon, it's still not too late to stop it. You – you are *sure* you want to marry me?"

"You strange child, it's I who should be asking you that," he said quizzically, holding her hand. "You'd better go in, sweet. You've a long day ahead. Don't keep me waiting at the church for more than ten minutes, will you?"

"I won't keep you waiting at all," she said seriously.

He took her face between his hands and looked down at her with a strange unfathomable expression in his grey eyes.

"Bless you. I hope you never regret our rapid courtship, my dear," he said gravely. And then, with a light kiss on her

lips, he opened the nearside door and gave her a gentle push.

Jan's wedding day was the first really hot day of the year, and as she looked up at the cloudless blue sky she prayed that it might be a good augury for her married life.

She had just discovered that she had overslept and that the family would be waiting for their breakfast, when there was a tap at the door and Marigold came in with a tray.

"Two more hours and you'll be a blushing bride, my poppet. How are your nerves? Jittery?" she asked gaily.

Jan examined her sensations and found that a healthy appetite for the orange juice and scrambled eggs, and some anxiety about her hair — washed and set by Linda late last night — predominated.

"Not particularly," she said, climbing back into bed and hitching up her pillows.

"I'm dying to see your dress. You are a fiend — keeping it locked away until the last moment," her sister remarked, sitting on the end of the bed and lighting a cigarette. Jan thought she looked pale and rather strained and wondered if Marigold, so pretty and so poised, could possibly mind that her two younger sisters were the first to be getting married.

"If you think the dress is awful, please don't tell me. By the time I'm dressed I shall probably need all the moral support I can get," she said lightly.

Marigold watched her eat for a while, and then said slowly, "You know, Simon's been good for you. You've changed quite a bit since your engagement. You aren't so shy and you've got a . . . a kind of bloom on you. I suppose it's the effect of being in love."

Jan laughed. "Why don't you follow suit, then?" she asked. "With a bloom on *you*, you'd be positively gorgeous."

Her sister got up from the bed and wandered over to the dressing-table where she toyed with a flask of scent for a moment.

"Perhaps I will some time," she said carelessly.

At a quarter to eleven Jan stood before the long mirror inside her wardrobe door and saw herself as a bride.

Although she had tried on both dress and veil separately, she had never worn the "full rig" as Alistair called it. Now, looking at her reflection with grave questioning eyes, she knew that this day, these few fleeting hours, were the closest she would ever come to beauty.

The dress was made of palest ivory silk, so fine that it was almost transparent, and with the subtle sheen of a pearl or the satiny texture of a rose petal. The brief Récamier bodice was fastened close to her throat with a row of tiny silk-covered buttons, and the swathed sash, high under the bosom, fell in two long wings which formed a short train behind the draped skirt. On her hair, brushed into soft wings above her ears, she wore a crown of silver leaves entwined with sprays of orange blossom, and about her floated a fragile mist of veiling.

Drawing on the silk gloves which almost met her tight elbow-length sleeves, she picked up the formal posy of lilies of the valley which she had chosen for her bouquet and, at the same moment, her mother tapped at the door and called, "Jan, darling, can you manage? Wouldn't you like us to help you?"

"I'm ready, Mother. I shan't be a moment," she called back. "You go down. I want to make a grand entrance."

She heard her mother's heels clicking down the corridor, and waited a little while, hoping they would all be in the hall when she went downstairs. Then, with a last glance at the mirror, she unlocked the bedroom door and went out to the landing.

As she had hoped, they were all in the hall as she turned the bend of the stairs. For a second they did not know she was there, and then Linda heard the rustle of her train on the carpet and said, "Ah, here she is." They all turned and looked up.

Very slowly, her fingers barely touching the balustrade, Jan walked down to meet them. Nobody spoke. It was as if they were transfixed. And then, for the first time in her life,

Jan felt the power and magic of beauty and thought, "Now, oh, surely *now*, Simon will forget Venetia."

She reached the last step and smiled at them. "Well, will I do?" she asked solemnly.

"Darling, you look lovely! Perfectly lovely!" Her mother came forward, her hands outstretched.

"Very nice, old girl. Simon's a lucky chap," said Alistair approvingly.

And then they were all crowding round her, eager to praise, while Mrs. Banks, the "daily," had an enjoyable weep in the background.

"Children, we must fly! It's almost five past eleven," Mrs. Meldrum said, catching sight of the clock. "Now be sure not to leave the house till ten minutes past, Paul. Jan mustn't be at the church until exactly a quarter past. Good-bye, dearest. There's no need to be nervous. You look charming."

Left alone with her father, Jan felt strangely calm.

"How about a glass of champagne to steady our nerves?" Mr. Meldrum suggested.

"Yes, if you like, Father," she said quietly, seeing that it was he who was suffering from last-minute stage fright. Perhaps, after all, they loved her more than she had realised, she thought wonderingly.

Her father disappeared into the drawing-room where the buffet table was laid, and Jan heard the pop of a cork. In case her family's embraces had set her coronet askew, she went to the glass above the hall table to adjust it. The morning post was still on the silver salver with the daily paper beside it. Everybody had been too busy getting dressed to read them.

She glanced casually at the addresses and then unfolded the paper to see what was happening to the rest of the world on this greatest day of her life. Afterwards, she thought that if only her father had been quicker in bringing the champagne, or if someone had moved the paper, everything would have been different. As it was, she could not fail to see the

bold headline "U.S. Film Mogul Dead" and, beneath it, in smaller type, "Famous Producer Dies on Location: British Star Widowed."

The paper slipped from her hands and she closed her eyes. She did not need to read the story to know what those thick black letters meant. Venetia was a widow. Venetia was free again.

Her father, coming back to the hall, said, "Here you are, dear. Just time for a toast before we leave. Here's to your —"

He stopped short as Jan turned to face him, her eyes dark with anguish through the misty cloud of her veil.

"Good lord! Are you feeling groggy? Here, take a sip of this," he said concernedly.

"It's all right, Father. I — I'm just a little dizzy," Jan said faintly, a second before she pitched into his arms.

CHAPTER IV

WHEN Jan opened her eyes she was lying on the couch in the drawing-room, and her father was bending over her with a look of such helpless alarm that in any other circumstances she would have laughed.

"No, no, just lie there quietly for a while. I'll get you some brandy," he said quickly, as she attempted to sit up. "Ye gods, what a fright you gave me, child. I was only just in time to catch you."

Jan lay back against the cushions, her head swimming. Very soon he was back with the glass of brandy and, although it made her gasp and cough, it quickly dispelled her dizziness.

"I'd better dash round to the church and tell them to hold things up for half an hour," her father said, mopping his forehead.

"No, please — you can't!" Jan said urgently. "I — I'll be all right in a minute."

"Are you sure? You look frightfully white, my dear. I don't think you're fit to go through with it at present."

She sipped a little more brandy and struggled into a sitting position. "Please, Father! Just leave me alone for five minutes and I'll be fine," she said unsteadily.

"Let me fetch your mother. She'll know what's the best thing to do," he urged.

"No, you mustn't. They'll be waiting for us now. It's too late to change everything. It — it was only excitement which made me pass out. I'll be perfectly well again in a moment."

"Well . . . if you're quite sure," Mr. Meldrum said doubtfully, looking at her ashen face.

"Quite sure," Jan insisted. "Just give me a few minutes to rest and then we'll go ahead. They'll probably expect me to be late. It — it's a bride's prerogative, you know." She

tried to say it with a laugh, but the sound that came out was closer to a sob. "Go on, Father. You go and have that champagne and I'll pull myself together," she added, rather desperately.

Reluctantly, Mr. Meldrum obeyed. "I must clear up the mess in the hall. I had to drop the glasses to grab you before you fell," he said, trying to sound light-hearted. "Now be sure and call me if you feel another faint spell coming on."

When he had gone, leaving the door ajar, Jan got to her feet and made her way to the sideboard, holding on to the furniture as she moved because her legs still felt weak and crumbly. Pouring herself another shot of brandy, she wondered what the Vicar would think of a bride who reeked of spirits. The Vicar . . . the wedding . . . only then did the cause of her blackout come back to her. She swayed, stifling a murmur of pain.

What if Simon had also seen the paper and was already causing consternation at the church by not being there on time? What if she arrived to find that she had been jilted at the altar?

No, she thought wildly. No, he would never do that to me. If he knows, he would have rung up earlier — or come round. He wouldn't make a public fool of me.

And if he doesn't know? What if he, too, has been too rushed to read the papers? Are you going to marry him and let him find out later? Can you deliberately turn your back on this knowledge and pretend it has nothing to do with you?

Her hand trembled so violently that the brandy slopped over the rim of the glass and dripped on the carpet. For a moment the enormity of her dilemma made her wish that another wave of merciful darkness would engulf her.

She braced herself, struggling for calm. Her coronet had slipped backwards and the pins securing it were pulling at her scalp. Crossing to the fireplace, a little steadier now, she set the leaves in place and turned back her veil. She was still very pale, and her lips, so carefully painted with a fine sable brush an hour ago, were too vivid for the pallor of her cheeks.

Rouge, she thought. I shall have to put on some rouge. They mustn't guess what has happened. And then, with her fingers to her cheeks, her eyes almost feverishly bright, she knew what she was going to do – she was going through with it!

It was half past eleven when they reached the church.

"What happened? Why are you so late – and what *have* you done to your dress?" Linda, waiting to give the signal to the organist, hissed at her.

Jan submitted to having her train smoothed and arranged. Then her sister darted into the church and a few seconds later the organ began to play.

"Sure you can make it?" her father asked again.

She nodded, slipping her hand through his arm. "I'm sorry you had such a fright."

He patted her hand. "Ready?"

Slowly, her chin lifted, her eyes fixed straight ahead, Jan walked down the aisle beside him to the little group of people in the front pews.

Afterwards, two moments in her wedding service stood out in her mind.

The first was when the Vicar looked down at them from the chancel steps and said, "I require and charge you both, as you will answer at the dreadful day of judgment when the secrets of all hearts shall be disclosed, that, if either of you know any impediment why you may not be lawfully joined together in matrimony, you do now confess it."

The second moment was when, after they had made their vows – Simon making the solemn promises in a clear, steady voice while her own responses were little above a whisper – the Vicar smiled at them and said, "I pronounce that they be man and wife together."

The rest of the service, the psalms and the prayers and the Vicar's short homily on the joys and responsibilities of marriage, passed in a kind of dark haze. And when it was all over but the signing of the register, and Jan put back her veil, she still had not looked at Simon.

They were using his own car, with Alistair at the wheel, to drive back to the house and, as she sank against the soft leather upholstery and folded the wings of her sash across her knees, she felt as if she had passed through a physical ordeal.

They could not move off at once because a photographer – presumably from one of the national newspapers – was crouched in the rear doorway, exhorting them to, “Hold it for just one moment, if you please.”

“Smile, darling,” Simon said gently, his fingers warm over hers.

Jan forced her mouth into a smile, flinching as the flash-bulb exploded. Then the photographer disappeared and the passers-by who had stopped to see the bride stepped back on to the kerb, and the car moved away.

“Phew! I’m glad I don’t have to go through that every day,” Simon said, leaning back. “You looked wonderful, sweetheart – and as cool as ice. They’ll probably caption that picture ‘The Most Beautiful Spring Bride.’” He laughed and kissed her fingers and, looking at her husband for the first time, Jan saw that he did not know about Venetia.

“Oh, God,” she prayed. “Help me to make him forget her. I love him so much – so much! Don’t let him come to hate me.”

Three hours later Simon switched on the ignition, leaned out of the car window to wave a final good-bye to his newly acquired in-laws, and set the car in motion on the first lap of their journey to Amsterdam.

“Light a cigarette for me, will you, sweet,” he said presently, concentrating on the traffic. “They’re in my coat.”

Jan reached over to the back seat and found his cigarette case and lighter. She lit two, passing one to him.

“I didn’t know you smoked,” he said, glancing at her with raised eyebrows.

“I don’t – normally.”

He reached out his left hand and patted her knee. "Feeling a bit ragged? Never mind, we've given the others their money's worth. Now we can sit back and enjoy ourselves."

He did not talk much on the drive to London Airport, but he whistled a cheerful jingle, and his light-hearted mood made Jan feel like a criminal.

There had been a bad moment during the informal reception when her mother had said, "By the way, what on earth made you so late? You had poor Simon on hot bricks."

Jan, a little more colour in her cheeks, had given her father a look of mute appeal.

And he, bless him, had hesitated for the barest fraction of a second before saying cheerfully, "Oh, the bride snapped a suspender and we couldn't find a safety pin. Sorry if you had a few bad moments, Simon."

They left the car in the airport park in readiness for their return in ten days' time, and were able to have a quick cup of coffee in the restaurant before going through the Customs. The flight to Schipol Airport took about forty minutes and they reached the capital just as all the shops and offices were closing for the night.

Jan's first impression of Amsterdam was of a city of cyclists: fleets of cyclists massed behind each set of traffic lights, streams of cyclists pedalling along beside them and individual cyclists weaving dangerously in and out among the cars and causing their taxi-driver to smother ferocious oaths whenever they swerved too close to his wings.

When Jan murmured to Simon that she had never seen so many people on bicycles, the driver chuckled and said over his shoulder, "Is so, *mevrouw*. In Amsterdam we have one million people and half-million bicycles. Each year it grows more. Soon I have no hair, I think." And he lifted his cap and showed them the bald patch on the crown of his head.

The hotel where they were staying was situated on one side of a large open place, and the terraces flanking the entrance were crowded with people watching the passing scene or chatting together over glasses of *jenever*.

After Simon had signed the register and handed over their passports, they were taken upstairs in a lift and conducted to their room or, as Jan discovered presently, their suite of rooms. The sitting-room had french windows and, while Simon was tipping the page, Jan went on to the balcony. When she looked over the balustrade she discovered that the hotel was built on the side of a canal, and below, cruising along on the quiet surface of the water, were a family of ducks led by a handsome drake.

"Oh, Simon, look !" she exclaimed.

He followed her on to the balcony and looked over the rail, his arm falling lightly on her shoulders. At the same moment they heard three loud hoots on a klaxon and a small boat emerged from beneath a bridge which spanned the canal at the entrance to the square.

"Do you think you're going to like it?" he asked.

"Oh, yes. It's delightful," she said eagerly. For a moment her interest in the scene below had made her forget that she had no right to be happy when her conscience was heavy with guilt. Her smile faded and she pulled off her gloves with quick, nervous jerks.

"How about a hot shower and a snack before we start exploring?" Simon said easily, beginning to loosen his tie. "You go first and I'll start unpacking my gear. I'd better have another shave. I don't want to ruin that schoolgirl complexion of yours." He grinned at her, his eyes wrinkling at the corners.

Jan flushed scarlet and fled in search of the bathroom, which adjoined their bedroom. Her case was on the luggage rack, and she found her bath robe and toilet case and disappeared.

When she emerged, her hair curling in soft tendrils round her face, Simon had changed into a dark silk dressing-gown and was sitting by the bedroom window with a plate of sandwiches and a bottle on the table at his elbow.

"*Citroen jenever* — lemon gin — try some," he invited, pouring some of the clear yellow liquid into a second glass.

Jan sipped it cautiously. Usually she disliked neat gin, but she found that this type had a smooth, slightly citreous flavour which was pleasant to the palate.

Simon pushed the sandwiches towards her. "I think we'll stretch our legs and find somewhere quiet for dinner. We can paint the town red later on," he said casually. "I'll go and get cleaned up. Don't take too much of that stuff. It has a delayed kick."

She sat for a moment, eating a sandwich for which she had no appetite and listening to him whistling under the shower. Then she put on a simple dress of fine sage wool, did her face and hair and started to unpack. She had nearly finished when Simon returned, his hair wet from the shower, his breadth of shoulder and narrow hips emphasised by the thin robe.

He touched a frilly petticoat which she had left on a chair. His hand, with its long square-tipped fingers and muscular wrist, looked very masculine against the lace-edged flounces.

"This is pretty," he said.

Jan put the petticoat in her half of the wardrobe. As she closed the door she felt his arms come round her and smelt the clean tang of toothpaste and after-shave lotion.

"Well, Mrs. Webster?" he said quietly. "Are you glad you married me?"

She turned in his arms and clung to him, hearing his heart beat under her cheek. But when he tipped up her chin and kissed her, she could not help stiffening. But it was remorse, not shyness, which made her tremble and draw away. He did not try to hold her, but said, "I won't be long. Have you got a jacket? It may be chilly later."

She picked up her stole and bag and went into the sitting-room to wait for him, and as she looked at the twilight sky and saw the first glimmer of stars she remembered something she had once read about happiness. "You cannot build your dreams on the wreckage of other men's hopes."

It was almost dark when they left the hotel and walked into the centre of the city. The restaurant where they dined

was small and dimly lit and half-empty. While they ate, Simon told her about some of the places they would visit during the week. If he noticed that she was quiet and abstracted, he made no comment but kept up a cheerful flow of conversation.

It was only at the end of the meal that he put his hand over hers and said gently, "There's nothing to be afraid of, little one. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes — yes, of course." She managed a fleeting smile, and wanted to weep.

They returned to the hotel by way of the side streets, their footsteps echoing on the cobbled quays. Where the streets crossed the lamplit tree-lined canals, there were little hump-backed bridges, and the houses they passed were tall and narrow with quaintly shaped gables and painted shutters. Simon explained that the whole city was built on thousands of wooden piles driven into the original marsh land, and said that tomorrow they would take a river bus along the network of waterways.

It was after eleven o'clock when they reached the hotel, and he gave Jan their key and said he would follow her up when he had checked that a car had been hired for them.

Alone in their room, she removed her make-up and put on a nightdress and *négligé* of fine white chiffon. Then she sat at the dressing-table and began to brush her hair, her heart beating very fast.

Waiting for Simon to come she knew that, though she might pay for what she had done for the rest of her life, she had ten days of happiness ahead — ten short days, and perhaps a faint flicker of hope that she could drive out his memories of Venetia and make him come to love her.

The following morning, Jan sat on the back seat of a river bus and had a duck's-eye view of the city. The craft, a long, flat-bottomed launch with a glass roof to shelter its twenty passengers from a sudden shower or, as was the case today, to broil them in the brilliant sunshine, cruised slowly along

the labyrinth of canals while a pretty blonde guide gave a description of the passing scene in several languages.

Presently they swung out into the choppy waters of the docks and were dwarfed by loading freighters and giant passenger liners. On the way back to their berth they passed the city's floating flower market and some of the many houseboats which helped out the housing shortage. Since, according to their guide, most of them had every modern convenience and even television sets, Jan thought them a delightful equivalent to the English "pre-fab."

As it was so hot, Simon suggested that they should spend the afternoon in the cool galleries of the Rijksmuseum, the national art gallery. In the evening they dined at a Javanese restaurant and had a delicious but very filling *rijsttafel*, an Indonesian meal made of fluffy rice to which spicy helpings of shrimps, onions, fried fruit, meat balls and a dozen other titbits were added.

In the days that followed, Jan fell completely under the city's spell. As she said to Simon, it was not like a great bustling metropolis, but more like a very large and picturesque market town. There seemed to be none of the grime and foul traffic-fumes to which Londoners were inured, and the people did not look harassed and tired, but looked fresh-faced and cheery, eager to practise their English on tourists and to point out the attractions of their city.

Towards the end of the week they took the car and drove to Haarlem in the centre of the tulip country. Mile upon mile, as far as the eye could see, the earth was ablaze with colour, all stirring softly in the breeze like a lake of white and gold and deepest crimson.

"Do you realise that this is our half-way mark? We've only five days left," Simon said lazily, as they picnicked on the grass beside the road.

He was lying on his back on the rug, a bottle of beer in one hand and a crusty cheese roll in the other.

"I'm glad we came to Holland. I'd always imagined it as rather a dull country – because of being so flat, I suppose,"

Jan said thoughtfully, nibbling some of the spicy gingerbread loaf which they had bought in a small town with the curious name of S'hertogenbosch the day before.

Presently, when Simon had finished eating and seemed to be half-asleep, she looked down at his face and felt so much tenderness for him that her eyes filled with tears. He was by turns the gayest companion, making absurd jokes until she choked with laughter, and the most gentle and considerate lover. A stranger, she thought, would have thought them idyllically happy – and would not have been so very far from the truth, in a way. If affection and respect and shared tastes made for happiness, then they were happy. No outsider would guess that one ingredient was lacking, that there was a single hidden flaw in their relationship.

It had seemed to her that to tell him how much she loved him would emphasise his own inability to answer her in kind. It had been hard sometimes to hold the words back, to show her love but never to speak it. But now, sitting on the grass, listening to the rustle of reeds in the dyke nearby, she was glad that she had been able to discipline herself. It was useless to pretend that Simon's feelings for her had changed since their marriage. His affection had deepened perhaps, but it was still only a likeness to love, not the true face.

If she had never heard of Venetia, had never seen the look in his eyes on that afternoon when he had opened the old chest in the cellar, she might have been deceived by his chivalrous care of her into believing that she was the first and only woman to touch his heart. But the incident in the kitchen of her parents' home when, for a few tumultuous moments, the present had ceased to exist for him and he had believed her to be Venetia, had shown her the deep gulf between a consuming passion and the gentler demands of affection. She was sure now that he had been so carried away that he had really thought himself back with Venetia. What other conclusion was to be drawn? That night he had kissed her as if she were a fire in his blood, a woman who stirred the very depths of his being. He had not made the mistake

again. Now he made love to her as if she were very dear to him, as if he were grateful to her for helping him put away the past. Never fiercely and masterfully, never with rapture.

Simon sat up and flicked a beetle off his arm. "Time we were getting back if we're going to dance tonight," he said, starting to pack their gear.

Jan scrambled up and shook out her cotton skirt. It was as warm as midsummer and she was bare-legged and wearing a sleeveless pink linen top. Simon's skin was the kind which never entirely lost the tan of summer. Now he was as brown as a tinker, and her own paleness had become a healthy golden glow.

"Your freckles are multiplying," he said teasingly, as they got into the car. "People will take you for my schoolgirl sister — even my daughter, at a pinch."

"I know. And in ten years' time they'll click their tongues and say, 'What can a woman of her age see in that awful old man?'" she retorted, remembering too late that Simon was not likely to be amused by jokes about young women with elderly husbands. She cursed her thoughtlessness.

As they drove back to the city she wondered why, when one wanted to avoid a certain topic, one found oneself making direct or indirect allusions to it at every turn.

On the last night of their honeymoon they returned to Amsterdam after a long day in the country and arrived at the hotel at the hour when most of the visitors were taking apéritifs on the terrace. Simon gave his ignition key to a porter who took the car round to the park, and they were walking up the steps when someone called his name. He turned, his glance scanning the crowded tables.

"Oh, lord, here goes our last evening," he said, in an undertone. "Why the devil does he have to show up here?"

Jan looked at the couple who had risen from their chairs and were weaving their way between the tables with welcoming smiles. The man was fair-haired and flamboyantly handsome, and the girl with him was a startling ash-blond in a dress of vivid nasturtium.

"Well, hello! Fancy meeting you, old boy. You look jolly fit. Absolutely in the pink," the man said heartily, clapping Simon on the shoulder and giving Jan a bold comprehensive stare.

"Jan, this is Roger Hartley. Roger . . . my wife," Simon said, with rather cool civility.

"Delighted to meet you, Mrs. Webster," said Mr. Hartley, seizing her hand and kissing it with practised gallantry. "Oh, this is Sandra Darcy."

The blonde gave Jan an artificial smile and regarded Simon with greater interest.

"We're both on location here, you know," Roger Hartley explained. "Damned boring it is, too. Give me Paris or Brussels every time. They've really got some night life. This place is as bad as the provinces at home. Most of the locals seem to go to bed about ten. Now, how about a drink, eh? A spot of the jolly old *jenever*."

Simon looked down at his dusty flannels and open-necked shirt. "We're not really dressed for the bar, Roger. We'd better nip up and change."

"Oh, righti-oh, dear chap. See you as soon as you're decent," Roger agreed cheerfully.

Going up in the lift, Simon said, "Don't worry: we'll have a couple of drinks and then I'll make some excuse to dodge them. I can't stand the fellow, but I didn't want to be point-blank rude to him. He was in *The Mallory Affair*, you know."

"What an extraordinary girl," Jan said reflectively. "Did you notice that bracelet round her ankle and the green toenails?"

Simon grinned. "I was hypnotised by the phenomenal superstructure."

Jan giggled. "She gave you a terrific glad eye."

"Yes, so I noticed. Too bad I'm stuck with you. I might have cut Roger out," he said with mock regret.

When they went down again Roger and his companion were stationed near the entrance to the bar, so that it would have been impossible for them to sneak past without being

seen. Simon ordered a round of drinks, flickered a surreptitious wink at Jan and asked Roger how life was treating him. Supplied with his favourite topic, Mr. Hartley kept the conversation going for a full quarter of an hour while Sandra, who had evidently heard it all before, sipped her whisky sour and focused her melting eyes on Simon.

After a further ten minutes of listening to Roger about Roger, Simon explained that they were dining with some Dutch friends and would have to leave.

"Oh, too bad! I was looking forward to a convivial evening," Roger said, looking deflated. "How about fixing up a foursome for tomorrow night, old boy?"

"Sorry, old boy, but we're flying back to London in the morning," Simon said smoothly. "Some other time, perhaps. Good night, Miss Darcy."

"I say, old chap, you heard about our erstwhile leading lady, I suppose," Roger said, as they stood up.

"Catherine Ayr?" Simon queried, referring to the actress who had taken the lead in his last play.

"No, no – the beautiful Venetia," said Roger. "It's just occurred to me that, being holed up here for ten days, you may have missed the news. I dare say you haven't bothered with the papers much – being on your honeymoon and all that." He gave Jan a leer which confirmed her opinion that, whatever his capabilities on the stage, he was not a very winning personality when off it.

"What about Venetia?" Simon said blankly.

"Oh, only that her old man has kicked the bucket. Pegged out in the middle of a film. Heart, you know. Thought you might be interested."

Simon's face was completely expressionless. "No, I hadn't heard. It must have been a great shock to her," he said quietly. "Good night. Good luck with your film."

As they walked across the square, Jan dared not look at his face. Her own emotions were confused, but the predominant one was a sense of resignation. He would have been bound to find out as soon as they reached home. She

could only be thankful that Roger Hartley had not come to Amsterdam sooner.

It was a twenty-minute walk to the famous Five Flies restaurant, where they had reserved a table for their last dinner in Holland. By the time they were seated, whatever violent feelings had ravaged his face in the dimness of the streets, Simon was in complete control of himself. There was not a sign in his manner that he had just heard a shattering disclosure.

But when they got back to the hotel he said he was not tired and would sit up for a while with a drink and a cigar.

"You get a good night's rest, little one," he told her. "This time tomorrow you'll be a hard-working housewife."

And, long after he must have supposed her to be asleep, Jan heard him pacing the other room. Then, for the first time, she turned her face into the pillow and cried herself silently to sleep.

Many times in the weeks that followed, Jan wondered if she ought to go to Simon and say, "Look, I know about Venetia. I married you under false pretences, knowing that you still loved her and that she was free again. If you want to leave me, you can. I want you to be happy."

But although there was seldom a day, or even an hour, when the thought of Venetia did not haunt her like an accusing wraith, she could not bring herself to put her knowledge to him. But for this weight of uncertainty and guilt, she would have been supremely happy. She had enjoyed running her parents' house, but it was a keener pleasure to dust and polish her own furniture, to stock her own store cupboards and to spend hours concocting dishes which would appeal to Simon's palate.

Among the souvenirs of their honeymoon was a set of gaily enamelled cast-iron casseroles which Simon had bought for her in one of Amsterdam's big department stores, and another treasure was the blue-and-white rose bowl which they had found in Delft. These were the things which made a

real home, she thought. Things carefully chosen and with happy associations. Gradually, over the years, they would have a whole collection of such well-loved treasures, each with its own little history.

Gradually, over the years . . . but will we be here then? she thought with a pang. She was always catching herself out in such thoughts – thoughts that took for granted that their marriage would last for ever.

A few days after their return, when the house was in reasonable order, Simon settled down to some hard work on his play. He was, she discovered, very bad at getting up in the morning. He had to be forcibly roused and tended to be irritable before he had had breakfast. Conversely, like the actors for whom he wrote, he became animated and active late at night, and, while he worked to set hours during the day, the keys of his typewriter often tapped faster and for longer stretches late at night. Two nights out of three, she would go to bed before him and wake up at one or two o'clock to hear the muted clatter of the machine in the study below.

She learnt that, if the play was going well, it was wiser to let him work through meal times and not to take in a snack. He never glared at her or was angry when, at first, she made this error. But she could tell from the abstracted expression on his face that he had been lost in a world of his own creation and was unconscious of hunger or thirst, even when it was several hours since his last meal. On the rare days when his well-disciplined imagination refused to produce anything worth while after he had been at his desk for an hour, he would push the typewriter aside and get down to some odd jobs about the house. Then, an hour or two later, she would hear the slam of the study door and know that ideas were flowing again.

It often troubled her that they should have settled into domestic routine so quickly. She had heard women talk of the placid companionship which followed the early bliss of married life, the time when living together was no longer an

exciting novelty. That they should have reached this state so swiftly seemed to be yet another proof of the character of their relationship, she thought wistfully.

One evening, about six weeks after their wedding, Jan was making a ruffled valance for the bed in the spare room and Simon was lounging on the sofa, working on a crossword puzzle and occasionally reaching for a glass of iced lager, when she said, "I think I'll make the little room at the end of the landing into a sewing-room, Simon. Then I won't have to keep tidying away my bits and pieces. Do you think you could fix up a really long cutting-out bench for me?"

"I should think so." He filled in the last word of the puzzle and tossed the paper aside. "I thought you might want that room for something else before too long."

"Something else?"

He grinned at her, the slow lazy grin that always made her heart turn over. "Not very quick on the uptake tonight, are you? I meant a nursery."

She stared at him. "Oh, no!" she exclaimed involuntarily.

He swung his legs to the floor and reached for a cigarette. "I thought you wanted children," he said quietly.

"I did – that is, I do, only . . ."

"Only what?" His tone was sharp and incisive.

She floundered for words to cover what could not be said. "Well . . . we've only been married six weeks," she said, with an uncertain laugh.

"Sometimes it seems like six years." This time his voice was expressionless.

"Does it, Simon?" she asked anxiously.

He shrugged. "I wasn't expressing my feelings, sweetheart. I was merely voicing what sometimes seems to be your attitude."

"B – but that's not true," she protested perplexedly. "I don't feel like that at all. Why should you think I do?"

He stood on the hearthrug, his back to the fireplace which at present was filled with white lilac from the Davisons' garden.

"You know, I used to think you were a very uncomplicated young thing," he said slowly. "Perhaps I was wrong. Anyway, to get back to the point, have you changed your mind about wanting a family?"

"No . . . not exactly. I — I just think it might be best to wait until . . . until we're more used to each other. It takes some time to adjust to living with another person. One can't learn everything about them in a few weeks," she said evasively.

"How true." There was an edge of sarcasm in his voice which puzzled and hurt her.

It was so unlike him to use that cutting tone. What had she said to annoy him? Was it her lack of enthusiasm when he spoke of having children? She flushed. How could she tell him that the true reason for her reluctance was that, if their marriage was not to last, it would be better for there to be no indestructible link between them?

A few days later Paula Davison telephoned to say that she was spending the day in London, and would Jan care to lunch with her? Jan agreed at once. Simon was lunching at his club and would probably be out till supper time, so she was glad of an invitation which, in the words of old Mrs. Banks, would "take her out of herself."

She met Paula outside Swan and Edgar's at noon, and after doing some shopping they had lunch in a restaurant where there would be no black looks if they lingered over coffee. It was the first time they had met since the wedding, although Ben had been to the house for supper after a business conference.

Leaning back in her chair, Paula said, "You know, I would hardly recognise you as the girl Simon brought to see us that Sunday. I suppose marriage always gives a woman an added confidence, but you were so very unsure of yourself in those days that the change is doubly noticeable."

"I didn't realise my shyness was quite so bad," Jan said, smiling.

"I don't think it was really shyness. You didn't hide your

head if anyone spoke to you, but you looked as if you were expecting to be snubbed or made a fool of," Paula said reflectively.

And now I camouflage it better, Jan thought drily.

Aloud, she said, "Perhaps it's just my clothes. I haven't worn all my trousseau yet, but Simon insisted on buying me some more dresses the other day. He's terribly generous."

"So I should hope," Paula said. "But wait till you start having babies, my dear; you won't have a rag to your back. So make the most of things while you've got the chance – and the figure." She patted her ribs and sighed. "I shall have to go on a diet. I've put on an inch in the last six months. Oh, by the way, I see that Venetia Farr is coming back to England."

The information was tacked on to the end of her remarks with so little change of tone that, for a second, it failed to register. Then Jan's fingers tightened on the handle of her cup and her heart seemed to miss a beat. But she managed to assume an expression of polite interest.

"Oh, really?" she said carefully.

"Yes, it was in the paper this morning," Paula went on. "Apparently she's finished her film commitments for the time being and is coming over to look up old friends."

"How nice," Jan said blankly.

Paula seemed about to add something, then changed her mind and looked at her watch. "Have you time to help me choose a sensational hat for a wedding we're going to next week?" she asked. "I can't afford anything too fabulous, but Fenwick's usually have the latest styles at fairly reasonable prices, don't they?"

They collected their parcels and gloves and paid the bill. Neither of them mentioned Venetia again.

The rest of the week passed without event until Saturday night. Jan was reading in bed and Simon was still working when there was an urgent and repeated ring at the front door bell. As Simon did not know she had come upstairs,

Jan slipped on her dressing-gown and pattered down. But as she turned the bend of the stairs, she saw that he was already at the door and doing his best to calm an agitated and almost hysterical Linda.

"Oh, Jan, you must help me! Can I stay here tonight? *Please!*" Linda burst out, as soon as she saw her sister.

"Why, yes, of course you can. But what's the matter?" Jan asked anxiously.

Linda dissolved into a paroxysm of tears, sobbing so wildly that Jan became really alarmed and signalled to Simon to help her get her sister into the drawing-room where she could sit down.

"Linda, dear, nothing can be so very terrible," she said, when her sister had calmed a little.

Linda fumbled in her bag for a handkerchief. Her lovely face, always so skilfully made up, was blotched with tears, and in spite of her sophisticated dress and fashionable hair style she looked very young and curiously pathetic.

"You don't know what's happened yet," she said, a break in her voice, her tears brimming over again.

"I'll make a pot of tea," Simon said tactfully.

When he had gone Jan perched on the arm of the chair and put her arm round her sister's heaving shoulders. "Well, tell me, then. Perhaps we can help," she urged quietly.

Linda made a strong effort to recover herself and dabbed at her eyes, her breath coming in short quivering sighs.

"No one can help. It's all my own fault. Oh, Jan, what shall I do — what shall I do?" she wailed.

"If you tell me what's the trouble, I may be able to suggest something," Jan said gently, a good deal shaken by seeing her sister's seemingly impregnable composure so utterly shattered by the mysterious disaster.

"It's to do with Mark. I — I've broken our engagement," Linda said, in a muffled voice.

"Oh . . . I see." Jan pursed her lips. "Well, it's a pity, perhaps — but not a tragedy."

Linda blew her nose. "Can I have a cigarette, please?" she

asked in a more normal tone, although her eyes were still dangerously moist and she had to bite her lips to control their trembling.

"Of course." Jan fetched the box and lit one for her. "When did all this happen?" she asked.

"Tonight. I've been trying to pluck up courage to tell him all week."

"You found out that you didn't love him enough?" Jan asked. It was not as much of a surprise as her sister seemed to expect.

Linda nodded. "Worse than that," she said miserably, drawing on the cigarette with quick, nervous puffs. "I – I'm in love with someone else."

This was a surprise. Jan's eyes widened. Then she said, "Look, I think you'd better try to tell me from the beginning. I've seen so little of you lately that I don't know what's been happening."

Linda lay back in the chair with a long sigh. Her left hand was bare and Jan guessed that she had given the fabulous solitaire diamond back to Mark when she broke the engagement. I wonder if Mother and Father know yet, she thought.

"I should never have agreed to marry him," Linda said dully. "But I'd never been properly in love with anyone and I thought I never would be. I liked Mark and he was crazy about me and – well, I thought it would be nice to be rich and important, so I said 'Yes.' I suppose that makes me sound like a cold-blooded gold-digger. Perhaps I was. But I was as fond of him as of any other man I'd known, and he knew I wasn't head-over-heels in love with him, so it didn't seem too bad at first."

She paused, rubbing her fingers against her temples as if her head ached. "Then, a fortnight ago, I met Joe. Oh, Jan, I love him so. The very first time we met I knew he was what I'd been waiting for – and I hadn't even known till then that I *was* waiting for someone. If only . . ." her voice trailed away and tears began to course down her cheeks again.

"But who is this Joe? And where did you meet him?"

Jan asked bewilderedly. Among Linda's long string of pre-Mark escorts she could not recall anyone with a name like Joe. Aubreys and Edwards were more in her sister's line, she thought with a glimmer of humour. A name like Joe suggested someone much too plebeian to suit Linda's exclusive tastes.

Linda wiped her eyes with the now sodden handkerchief. "At the National Gallery, of all places!" she said, with the ghost of a smile. "I had an hour to kill and I suppose I was having doubts about marrying Mark, so I wanted to be quiet and think things out. I sat down on a seat in one of the galleries, and presently a man came and sat down next to me. After a bit he spoke to me. I don't remember what he said — I thought he was one of those dismal creatures you do get hanging about in museums. I gave him a freezing look and then I saw that he wasn't a toad at all, but rather nice-looking, in a rugged kind of way. He looked about as miserable as I felt."

She stopped and seemed lost in contemplation of that first encounter.

"And then?" Jan prompted.

Her sister made a vague gesture of the hand. "Oh, then we got talking and I found out he was on leave from Kenya and that he didn't know a soul in London and was counting the days till he could get back to the bush, or whatever they call it out there. After a while he asked if I'd have tea with him. I was a bit dubious — he looked quite safe, but you never know with men — but I agreed. We went to the Corner House and had beans on toast. Do you know, I'd forgotten how I used to love baked beans when I was little."

Sympathetic as she was to her sister's distress, Jan began to feel that this recital of her friendship with the man from Kenya might take all night.

"What happened after the baked beans?" she asked.

An expression which she had never expected to see on Linda's face suddenly illumined the elder girl's perfect features. In spite of her smudged mascara and reddened eye-

lids, she looked radiant.

"We finished tea and had a cigarette and talked for a while," she said, "and then suddenly, just like that," she snapped her fingers, "I knew I was in love with him. He knew it too. We stopped talking and sat looking at each other."

"But didn't he notice your ring? Didn't he realise you were engaged?" Jan asked.

"I wasn't wearing it. I'd forgotten to put it on. I suppose if I hadn't, none of this would have happened," Linda said sadly.

"So then?"

"We went for a walk. I think we must have walked about ten miles that night. Ordinarily my feet would have been killing me, but I didn't even notice them with him. Joe told me about his job as a U.N. Officer and about when he was a boy – everything there is to know about him. Then he took me home and we said good night, and then he said, 'You are going to marry me, aren't you?' and I said 'Yes.' "

Her eyes, which had been fixed on the electric fire which Jan had switched on, returned to her sister's face. "I'd forgotten all about Mark, you see," she ended.

Jan wondered what was delaying Simon with the tea. She was beginning to feel in need of something to steady her.

"And since then?" she asked.

"Well, to cut a long story short, I met him the next day and told him about Mark and said I'd break it off. He was a bit upset at first – Joe was, I mean – and then he said that if I was going to marry him I had to realise that it would mean giving up everything I had always been used to, and was I sure I could face that. I said I was – and I am!" she added, as if defying Jan to question this.

"But I thought you said you didn't tell Mark till tonight?" Jan queried.

Linda flushed. "Yes. You see I'd knew there'd be the very devil of a row when Ma and Pa found out – so I kept putting it off. Joe thought I had already done it and was

furious when he found out I hadn't. He said that either I had the guts to face a family row, or I'd never make a good wife. So tonight I told them all."

"It must have been a frightful shock to Mark," Jan said quietly.

"Yes, it must – but he was terribly sweet about it. He said he'd always thought it was too good to last and that, as long as I was sure this was the real thing, he wouldn't stand in my way. I wish he'd been beastly to me. I wouldn't have felt such a worm if he'd stormed and shouted."

"And Mother and Father – how did they take it?"

"They were furious. I've never seen them so angry," Linda said, with a reminiscent shiver. "Mother was livid because it meant cancelling all the arrangements for the wedding, and Father said he absolutely forbade me to marry a complete stranger and go off to the wilds of Africa. He – he said I'd always been an empty-headed butterfly and that I wouldn't last five minutes in a situation that required an atom of character. Finally I dashed out of the house and came here."

There was a long pause while Jan considered the situation. Presently she said, "Do they know where you are?"

Linda shook her head, and at the same moment Simon appeared with a tea-tray.

"I've made up the spare bed and put the fire on," he said, after a quick glance at his sister-in-law to see how she was.

Jan gave him a grateful look. "Simon, would you telephone home and tell them that Linda's spending the night here? And I think you'd better make another call too. Is Joe on the phone, Linda?"

"Yes. He's staying at some frightful boarding house near Victoria station. But what are you –?"

"You're worn out and you need a good night's sleep. We'll ask him to come round in the morning and talk it over," Jan said firmly. "Now, what's his number?"

Linda told them and Simon went off to make the calls, accepting Jan's instructions for the second one without

comment, although he was obviously fogged by the whole business.

"You're being awfully good about all this," Linda said, when he had left them. "I suppose I shouldn't have come bursting in on you with all my troubles in the middle of the night. Oh, what a mess!"

Jan poured out the tea. "Rubbish! That's what sisters are for," she said. "Now, drink this, and then I'll find you a nightie and give you some aspirin to help you sleep. Everything will look much brighter in the morning. It always does."

Later, when Linda was safely tucked up in the spare room, Jan gave Simon a briefer account of what had happened.

"What do you make of it? Do you think she's being utterly mad?" she asked.

Simon shrugged. "It's hard to say. I don't know her very well, and nobody knows this Joe chap. It'll be easier to judge when we've met him."

"Simon, if she had married Mark, without really loving him, do you think they could have been happy?" she asked, waiting for his answer with a small knot of tension inside her.

He picked up the tray. "Stop worrying about it and get back to bed, my dear," he said carelessly. "We'll do what we can to help her, but it's no use fretting over it as if it were your own problem. I'll be up later. Sleep tight."

And, ruffling her dark head with his free hand, he left the room.

Joe — his real name was Jonathan Fleming — proved to be a spare, sunburned Scot with frank blue eyes and curly brown hair. He appeared to be a man of action rather than words — perhaps because his life was spent among African villagers with little European society — and it was difficult to see why the frivolous, pleasure-loving Linda should be so overwhelmingly attracted to someone so lacking in social polish.

But, after he had been in the house for a quarter of an hour, Jan was convinced that he was a thoroughly likeable and reliable young man. Whether they could be happy together was another matter. It was soon clear that Joe would no more think of changing his way of life than of cutting off his arm. He had been born in Kenya and his job was his whole world. But could Linda, however much she wanted to do so, succeed in adjusting herself to such very different circumstances?

By the time they had had lunch it was agreed that their parents should be given time to recover from the shock of Linda's announcement, and then Linda and Joe should go to see them and try to make them understand.

"It will take some doing, of course, but if Joe has another month before he goes back there's no great rush. Meanwhile you'd better stay here, Linda," Jan said. "I'll go and have tea with Mother this afternoon and see how she's reacting. If I can, I'll do some oil-pouring."

It proved to be a hectic week. As well as acting as an intermediary between her outraged parents and the ill-assorted lovers, Jan had to plan her first dinner party. Admittedly there was to be only one guest, but he was someone on whom she was particularly anxious to make a favourable impression.

Since their marriage, Simon had often spoken of Hugo Sallender, the man who had produced all his plays and who was a person of considerable importance in the theatrical world. For the past six months Mr. Sallender had been in America, and the prospect of meeting him – from Simon's description he sounded a rather formidable person with a barbed tongue and lashing disdain for any form of stupidity – was decidedly daunting.

On Friday evening after Joe and Linda had gone out, Jan put the finishing touches to the table. Linda had arranged the flowers for her and she was confident that their guest would not be able to find fault with her cooking. But whether he would consider her a suitable wife for Simon was debatable.

In an attempt to look as sophisticated as possible, she was wearing a black chiffon dress with long tight sleeves. A pair of pearl ear-rings which had been Simon's wedding present, and her topaz ring, were her only ornaments.

At precisely seven o'clock a sleek cream-and-black Armstrong-Siddeley drew up outside the house, and Jan heard Simon, who had been late changing, coming down to answer the door. A cool, rather drawling voice replied to his greeting and a few seconds later Mr. Sallender appeared in the drawing-room doorway.

"How do you do, Mrs. Webster," he said smoothly, when Simon had introduced them. His dark eyes — his mother had been Italian, Simon had told her — appraised her for a moment before he looked appreciatively about him.

"What a charming room," he said slowly. "Who's your decorator, Simon? Someone with a more discriminating taste than the perpetrator of that vulgarly modern flat, I perceive."

Simon poured out sherries. "Oh, Jan chose everything here," he said, smiling at her.

"Indeed?" Mr. Sallender's eyebrows arched in mild surprise. "You don't disdain the ancient arts of housewifery, then, Mrs. Webster?"

"No, I like them," she answered nervously, hoping that, after a few civil remarks to her, their guest would give most of his attention to Simon.

During dinner — home-made vegetable soup followed by chicken *vol-au-vent* and a *crème brûlée* — she was able unobtrusively to study him, and came to the conclusion that, to someone more self-possessed than herself, he would probably be very attractive. There was a kind of fascination in his suave manner and rather Latin appearance. When his dark, almost black eyes rested on her, she felt that he knew everything about her.

To her relief, the two men had plenty to discuss, and she took only a small part in their conversation. Presently, after Sallender had complimented her on the excellence of the meal, they returned to the drawing-room where the men lit

cigars and Jan occupied herself with some embroidery.

It was getting late and she was expecting their guest to take his leave shortly, when Simon answered the telephone and, after a brief exchange with their caller, excused himself to continue the conversation on the study extension.

There was silence for some moments after his departure. Then Sallender said casually, "I had the impression that you were somewhat nervous of meeting me, Mrs. Webster. Had Simon led you to believe that I was such an intimidating person?"

The needle pricked her finger and she stifled a murmur of pain. "Oh, no . . . of course not," she said hastily. "He's told me how much you've helped him." She hesitated, colouring slightly. "I'm afraid I'm rather shy and I — I thought you might not approve of me."

It was not what she had meant to say, but, startled and disconcerted by his question, she had inadvertently blurted out the truth.

"You intrigue me. Why shouldn't I approve of you?" he enquired, with a faintly sardonic expression. Before Jan could reply, he went on, "You must be a singularly modest young woman if you imagine that Simon's friends can find any cause to criticise his choice of a bride. I will confess that I was surprised to find you so very young, particularly as you are so unusually accomplished."

"Accomplished?" Jan echoed blankly.

"Most certainly. The evidence of your accomplishment is all around us," he said with a sweeping gesture. "As for your shyness" — there was the suspicion of a twinkle in his eyes — "I can assure you that in a profession where egotism is commonly carried to excess, a certain reticence and modesty are extremely refreshing."

Jan was so overcome by these generous compliments that she could only gaze at him in astonishment.

"I believe you have an unusual and charming Christian name," he said. "Although, in general, I dislike such familiarities on brief acquaintance, I wonder — since Simon and

I are such old friends – if I may have permission to use it.”

“Why, yes, please do,” she said readily.

When Simon returned he found his wife and friend engaged in an earnest discussion of the use of garlic. And when, replenishing their glasses, he gave her a questioning look, she was able to return it with a confident smile, her awe of Mr. Sallender quite dispelled.

It was nearly midnight when their guest departed, his use of Jan’s full given name causing Simon to look even more surprised.

At the door, the producer turned. “You know, I suppose, that Venetia is returning to our midst next week,” he said languidly. “No doubt someone will feel moved to arrange some kind of reception for her. You will find these theatrical parties excessively tedious, my dear Janetta, but they are one of the penalties you will have to pay for marrying a playwright. Good night.”

And, without waiting for their reactions, he went down the steps to his car.

CHAPTER V

VENETIA arrived in England the following Tuesday, and when Jan went to fetch the milk and the morning paper on Wednesday morning, she found a picture of the actress on the front page.

It had been taken as Venetia descended from her plane, and showed her wearing one fur coat and carrying another, her fair hair blown by the wind, her lips parted in the same brilliant smile that Jan had seen once before, in another newspaper photograph. She did not look like a woman recently bereft of a loved husband, although the dress beneath her sables appeared to be of black material.

Reluctantly, Jan put the paper beside Simon's plate and called up the stairs that his breakfast was ready. Linda was now living at home again, although her reconciliation with their parents was a rather frail *rapprochement*. The Meldrums were still violently opposed to her marriage to Joe Fleming and were making every effort to dissuade her from such a risky undertaking. How it would work out, Jan could not guess – although with Joe's furlough coming to an end, her sister would have to take action, one way or the other, very soon.

Simon came down in his dressing-gown. He had been working till the early hours and looked grey with fatigue. Jan had crept out of her bed as quietly as possible in the hope that he would sleep till noon, but he had woken while she was dressing and insisted on getting up.

"Oh, Simon, you should have stayed in bed. You look exhausted," she said worriedly, wishing she had hidden the paper away.

He looked in no state to be confronted with a reminder that Venetia was now within a few miles of them – if he needed a reminder. To her surprise, he put his arms round

her and kissed her with greater warmth than he had shown for some time. He had not yet shaved and his beard was rough against her cheek, but she did not mind. Lately he had seemed to avoid touching her, except for a brief kiss on the cheek in the morning and at bed-time.

"I feel fine," he said. "Something like a woman who's just given birth to a lusty infant, I imagine. It's finished at last."

"The play? Oh, darling, that's wonderful!" she said warmly. "Now what happens?"

"Well, first it goes to the typist to be sorted out and made legible, and then I'll see what Hugo thinks of it. Ah, kippers — good! I'm hungry."

He read his mail while he was eating, but he did not take up the paper until Jan had poured his second cup of coffee. She watched him shake out the folds and prop it against the milk jug. But, as on the night when Hugo Sallender had referred to a reception party, his expression was inscrutable.

She had expected that, if there was a home-coming party for Venetia, he would find some excuse for being absent and she would never know if they had been invited or not. But, two days later, at lunch, he said, "Hugo was right. There's a party for Venetia on Saturday. Would you care to go?"

She hesitated. "Do you want to?"

"I suppose we had better put in an appearance," he said casually. "It may amuse you if you've never been to these shindigs."

Jan helped herself to some more garden peas without knowing what she was doing.

He doesn't want to go — but he can't help himself, she thought heavily. He has to see her again.

"What ought I to wear?" she asked, after a moment.

"What about that yellow dress you wore at the Fandango?" he suggested.

It surprised her that he remembered it, and she was pleased until she thought that it was because he was not in love with her that he remembered her clothes. She had once

heard Marigold say that if a man was in love with you, he wouldn't notice if you wore a saucepan on your head, it was before they fell in love that men noticed details.

"Oh, no, I can't wear that dress," she said. "It's . . . well, it's wrong, that's all."

"Whatever you wear I'm sure you'll look very nice," he said carelessly, picking up his letters and leaving her to deal with the problem alone.

But, later in the day, as he was leaving the house to post the play to his typist, he dropped a cheque in her lap and said, "Perhaps you had better get something new for this affair on Saturday. I suppose all the women will be dressed to kill, so you may as well do your share."

She thanked him, touched by his generosity. Not until later did it occur to her that the gesture might have been prompted by the thought that, while she could never compare with Venetia and the other actresses in looks, she could at least be superlatively dressed. Lately, almost everything he said and did seemed to have a double significance when examined.

On Friday morning Hugo rang up.

"I'm afraid Simon is out. Can I give him a message?" Jan asked.

"No matter, my dear child. It was nothing of the first importance which I had to discuss with him," Hugo said negligently. "I presume you are both attending this tiresome function for Venetia tomorrow evening?"

"Yes, we are. Perhaps you could help me about it, Mr. Sallender. I've asked Simon what the other women are likely to be wearing, but he's so vague that I'm still not sure. But perhaps you don't notice clothes much?"

"On the contrary, I take a great deal of notice," he replied. "What were you thinking of wearing, may I ask?"

"Well . . . Simon has told me to buy something new – but I'm not even certain whether it will be full evening dress or cocktail frocks."

A low chuckle came over the line. "Oh, it will be very

informal – which means that the women will be at pains to excel each other in the grandeur of their *toilettes*. However, if I may be permitted to advise you, I suggest you rely on your youth and freshness to carry all before you. Something very simple will be the most effective contrast to the general ostentation.”

As many of the guests were appearing in current productions, the party was to take place after the theatres had closed, and it was nearly ten o'clock when Simon called up to Jan that they ought to be leaving the house.

He had changed earlier in the evening and had not seen her dress until she came downstairs. She had found it in the shop where she had bought her wedding dress. It was made of a subtle shade of pale topaz silk. Its whole success lay in the unusual colour of the material, which deepened to amber or lightened to champagne as the light fell on it.

Mindful of Hugo's advice, Jan was not even wearing her pearls: only her topaz ring.

“Do you approve?” she asked, revolving for Simon's inspection, her bare shoulders golden in the lamplight.

“Isn't it a trifle short for you?” he asked mildly.

“Oh dear, do you think so?” she asked anxiously. “I wondered if it was, but there wasn't time to have it altered. Does it look very bad?”

“Compared with some of the revelations we shall probably see, I expect you'll look as modest as a young novice,” he said drily. “But you won't need the stole. I have something warmer for you.”

He gestured towards the sofa and Jan saw that a long cardboard box lay on the cushions.

“Oh, Simon! You're much too good to me,” she exclaimed, lifting the short jacket of soft dark fur out of its nest of tissue. She slipped it on and ran to the mirror. The fur was as soft as snow against her skin, and she guessed from its silky sheen that it had cost a small fortune. “What is it? Mink?” she asked.

He shook his head. “Sable. I thought mink was con-

sidered rather commonplace nowadays."

"Oh, Simon, thank you! You're an angel," she exclaimed rapturously, reaching up to kiss him.

But he turned his head so that her lips only brushed his cheek, and said, "We'd better start. Did you lock the back door?"

Jan followed him out to the car, her delight in the luxurious gift marred by his cool acceptance of her thanks. He gives me so much, she thought wearily, but never what I long for most of all.

The party was being given by a couple who were both established stars of the stage and screen, and who had been close friends of Venetia before her departure for the States. When Simon and Jan reached their house the street was already crowded with opulent cars.

"Hm, it looks as if they've invited everyone in the business," Simon said drily, after they had managed to find a parking space some distance away.

They were admitted by a pretty uniformed maid who took Jan's jacket and showed them into a large room which was crowded with chattering people. Already the air was hazy with cigarette smoke and everyone seemed to be talking at the top of their voices. Simon stood in the doorway, his hand under Jan's elbow, his eyes ranging calmly over the crush. Jan wished she had a little of his assurance. Her knees felt like jelly and she was terrified that he would be swept away from her, and she would have to fend for herself among this intimidating horde of strangers.

Suddenly an elegant woman in dark blue lace emerged from the crowd and came towards them with outstretched hands.

"Simon, darling! What an age since we've met," she cried, kissing him. "And this" — turning to Jan — "is your adorable little bride. What a simply divine dress, my dear. Everyone is dying to meet you, of course: in fact simply green with curiosity. Now come and be introduced. Simon knows every-

one here, so we can leave him to hunt out his particular cronies."

And before Jan could even direct a mute plea for help at her husband, she found herself plunged into the crowd. Her hostess had darted away to greet some newcomers, and she was trying not to seem too gauche and tongue-tied among a group who seemed to be discussing a recent *première*, when the cocktail which she had been given was taken from her hand and replaced by a frosty glass of fruit juice. Turning, she found Hugo Sallender beside her.

"Good evening, my dear Janetta," he said, with a courtly inclination of his head. "Forgive me for wresting that position from you, but Naomi's cocktails are quite undrinkable, and these events are sufficiently trying without the added burden of a headache."

"Oh, thank you. I did think it tasted rather odd," she said gratefully.

Hugo surveyed her companions, who were listening to a *risqué* story recounted by an effeminate young man in a flowing cravat. "Let me present you to the few people here who are not bloated with their own self-importance," he said quietly, leading her away.

Half an hour later, when Hugo was still looking after her and Simon had managed to rejoin them, a sudden hush descended on the company.

"At last! The guest of honour dazzles us with her presence," Hugo murmured in her ear.

With everyone else in the room, Jan turned and looked towards the door. There, poised on the threshold, a vision in white and gold, stood the woman whose existence was the shadow on her happiness.

Since arriving at the party Jan had discovered that a number of the actors and actresses, whom she had taken to be in the early thirties when she had seen them on television or at the cinema, were considerably older than they appeared to the public. But Venetia Farr was not yet dependent on the

skill of make-up artists and lighting experts to safeguard her famous looks. If anything, she was more beautiful in reality than on the screen. Now, waiting for her hostess to come forward, apparently unconscious of the battery of critical eyes searching for any lessening of her charms, she was as lovely and compelling as a goddess.

Her glorious pale gold hair was swept back from her face and coiled in a lustrous chignon at the nape of her graceful neck, and her dress, a superb creation of white jersey, emphasised the flowing curves of her perfect figure. About her throat and at her ears and wrists there blazed the crimson fire of a magnificent ruby parure, and her lips were as red as the jewels against her creamy skin.

"My God! What a magnificent creature," Jan heard someone say, before everyone began talking again.

Jan looked at Simon and saw that he was lighting a cigarette, his knuckles white against the brownness of his hand. Then, as he extinguished the flame, she saw him exchange a glance with Hugo.

So Hugo knows, she thought sickly. But of course he does. He's one of Simon's closest friends. Perhaps that's why he's so nice to me. He thinks Simon was a fool to marry me and is sorry for me. Perhaps they *all* know, and are waiting to see how Venetia reacts when she learns he is married – and how Simon reacts – and even how I react.

However, if this was the case, it was some time before the general curiosity was satisfied, because Venetia was passing from group to group, like an absent queen returning to her court. Yet, knowing that every moment brought the climax of the evening nearer, Jan was scarcely aware of what she was saying and felt that the others, too, had only half their minds on the conversation.

At last the moment arrived. Venetia, talking to some people a few feet away from them, glanced over her shoulder and abruptly broke off whatever she had been saying.

"Simon! So you're here, too. I hoped you would be." With

a little crow of pleasure and a ravishing smile, she gave him her hands. "And you haven't changed a bit," she said, in her soft, slightly husky voice.

Simon held her hands for perhaps five seconds, his eyes unreadable.

"Hello, Venetia. How are you?" he said courteously. And then, before she could answer, he turned to Jan and said, "Jan, this is Venetia Farr. Venetia . . . my wife."

Only an actress – and perhaps not so many actresses – could have taken such a shock without showing by the twitch of a muscle that it was a shock, Jan thought afterwards.

There was a fractional pause while the two women looked at each other, and then Venetia said warmly, "But how exciting! I had no idea you were married, Simon. How do you do, Mrs. Webster. Your husband and I are old friends. I hope we shall be, too."

Jan forced a smile and murmured something inaudible, relieved when Venetia turned to greet Hugo. Strangely, her primary emotion was an intense gratitude to Simon for behaving as he had. Although she knew that the moment when Venetia had given him her hands must have tested his self-control to an extreme at which she could only guess, not even the most acute observer could have detected it. She was sure that he had presented Venetia to her, and not the reverse, as deliberately as he had used that special tone on the words "my wife." She could have forgiven him if he had betrayed his true feelings: now, even to have considered the possibility filled her with contrition.

Venetia turned to her again. "Are you also in the theatre, Mrs. Webster?" she asked charmingly.

"No: Jan is content to concentrate on looking after me," Simon said swiftly.

"And I can see how well she does it," Venetia said, smiling. "You look marvellously fit, Simon. But then you lead a regular life, I expect. You never were very keen on late parties and stuffy night-clubs, and all the things that lead to

dissipation, were you?" She opened her lamé bag and fitted a cigarette into a short gold holder. "How long ago it seems – those first wonderful weeks when *Storm Cloud* was such a success and you and I found ourselves famous," she said reminiscently. "Sometimes I feel as if it were half a century ago, and yet it's only six years – hardly any time at all."

Hugo lit her cigarette. "Are you planning to spend several weeks here?" he enquired.

She shrugged. "I have no plans, Hugo. I might even stay here."

"And relinquish your pedestal among the stars?" he asked drily.

"Oh – Hollywood!" she said, with a little *moue*. "Surely you have no illusions about the glamour of being a 'star,' my dear Hugo."

His heavy eyelids drooped, and there was a curious glint in his dark eyes. "I have no illusions at all, my dear Venetia," he responded sardonically.

It was only her fancy, of course, but it seemed to Jan that, for a second or two, there was a current of animosity in the atmosphere. Venetia was still smiling and Hugo's expression was bland, but something in their eyes made Jan think of two duellists gauging their adversaries' strength and cunning.

"I think you were born a cynic, Hugo," Venetia said carelessly. "You would suspect a saint of perfidy."

"I have never met a saint," he returned affably. "But I have infinite experience of the frailties of lesser mortals – and a lifetime in the theatre would disillusion the most passionate idealist. We have made an art of pretence and, inevitably, it is reflected in our lives. I have never yet met an actor or actress who was capable of restricting their talents to the stage or whatever other medium they chose for the projection of their gifts. They cannot help themselves. They make their living by simulating emotion until, finally, simulation becomes instinctive and all true feeling is lost."

"And what of producers – and playwrights?" Venetia asked coolly. "Are they also the hapless victims of this in-

sidious condition, or are they somehow less fallible?"

"Ah, but we only devise the form the pretence shall take – we don't practise it ourselves," Hugo remarked contemplatively. "For myself, I have always the intervening foot-lights to remind me that what I am shaping is only a picture of how life *might* be; never a reality. As for the playwright, he is a man who can clarify and commit his dreams to paper. But a dream, however vivid and believable it may seem at the time, is swiftly dispelled and forgotten, you know. I've no doubt that when Simon was working on *Storm Cloud*, the characters in it were very real to him. But by now, my dear Venetia, their substance has faded, just as a dream fades."

There was a brief silence and then Venetia laughed. "I expect you are right, Hugo. Perhaps actors do live in a world of make-believe. But, whatever our failings, we give a great deal of pleasure and, without us, people like you and Simon would have no means of expressing *your* particular talents. However this conversation must be boring poor Mrs. Webster – and perhaps shocking her a little. We are all used to the artificial glitter of our world, but she may prefer to believe that the glitter is true gold. Tell me, how did you come to meet this translator of dreams, Mrs. Webster?" she asked, with a teasing glance at Simon.

"We were on holiday in the same village," Jan said quietly.

"A rustic idyll – how charming!" the actress said gaily, her tone robbing the words of any sting they might have been thought to contain. "Have you been married long?"

Without thinking, Jan told her the date of their wedding.

Venetia's long lashes veiled her eyes for an instant. Then, looking directly at Simon, she said slowly, "How curious. That was the day after Leon's death."

Neither of the men made any of the conventional expressions of sympathy at her reference to her late husband, and something in Hugo's face confirmed Jan's intuition that he did not like Venetia. She wondered if it were one of those

groundless antipathies which sometimes spring up between people, or if he had some reason for mistrusting the actress. He did not strike her as a man who would take an unreasonable dislike to anyone – particularly a woman as beautiful and gifted as Venetia. He must have had just cause to do so.

Presently Venetia excused herself to speak to another of her former colleagues, and not long afterwards Simon agreed with Hugo that there was little point in staying till the early hours. Hugo had come by taxi and, as it had begun to rain, Simon suggested that they should wait in the shelter of the porch while he fetched the car.

When he had disappeared down the street, the producer lit a cheroot and said quietly, "What is your opinion of Venetia? Did she fulfil your expectations?"

Jan watched the light summer rain falling into the pool of a street lamp. "She's incredibly beautiful," she said slowly.

"Would you like to be as beautiful as that?"

"Why, yes, surely every woman wants to be beautiful," she said, thinking it an odd question.

"I can never understand why," Hugo said drily. "It brings no assurance of happiness, you know."

"Well, perhaps not – but it can't be a disadvantage," she said gravely.

"You think not?" he chuckled. "Oh yes, it can, my dear. Great beauty is like great wealth – it's frequently given to people who are ill-equipped to bear its responsibilities."

"I don't think I understand that."

"If a man has a great fortune at his command, he must also be very wise if it is to bring him any lasting satisfaction," he said. "Beauty is the same. Sometimes it wields even more power than money, and power can be a terribly destructive force in the wrong hands." He paused and then added softly, "Venetia would have been an equally clever actress with a plain face – and she would certainly have been a much happier woman."

Jan bit her lips, wondering if she was inviting a pointed rebuff. Then, mustering her courage, she said bluntly, "You

don't like her, do you?"

He was silent for so long that she wondered if he was deliberately ignoring her question. Then he said, "I pity her, my dear. She is caught in her own snare."

Jan might have risked asking him to amplify this rather cryptic statement, but before she could do so Simon arrived with the car, and there was no further opportunity to pursue the subject.

Joe and Linda were married at a register office ten days before Joe was due back at his post. It was a very different occasion from the one which had been planned a few months earlier, and Mr. and Mrs. Meldrum were still extremely perturbed over Linda's chance of happiness in such an alien environment. Linda, too, was somewhat oppressed by the circumstances surrounding her wedding – although she was still convinced that Joe was her destined mate and was determined to face the rigours of life in Kenya with fortitude, if not enthusiasm. They were flying to Nairobi directly after the wedding and then spending a short honeymoon at the Hotel Sinbad at Malindi before travelling up-country to the isolated territory where Joe worked. It would be two years before they would be able to come to England again.

"By which time I shall be completely unrecognisable, I expect," said Linda, her laugh having a note of trepidation in it. "I'll send you a snap of myself every six months. Then the shock of finding me changed into a stalwart pioneer type won't be too much for you."

"She's got more guts than one would think," Simon said, when they reached home after the wedding. "I hope he treats her decently once the honeymoon is over. She deserves a good break after standing up to so much opposition."

"It's not Joe I'm worried about. It's the life she'll have to lead," Jan said anxiously. "It sounds terribly primitive – no proper bath and the whatnot at the bottom of the garden. Still, if he builds this new bungalow, it should be easier for

her. I think what she'll miss most is having no other women to chat to. The nearest Englishwoman lives thirty miles away, and she probably isn't Linda's type."

"Supposing I'd been on leave from some wild neck of the woods. Would you still have married me?" Simon asked.

Jan flushed. I would have married you if you'd come from the North Pole or the Himalayas, she thought. Aloud, she said, "I'm not like Linda. I never had a very gay social life, so I wouldn't miss it as she will."

"You had a pretty miserable life in some ways, didn't you?" he said.

"Not miserable, exactly, but it wasn't ideal."

"You prefer the one you have now?"

She stared at him. "Well, of course. It would be rather strange if I didn't, wouldn't it?"

"Mm . . . I suppose it would," he said slowly.

Both Hugo and the impresario who had financed Simon's previous plays were enthusiastic about his new work. The backer was prepared for it to go into rehearsal immediately so that it could open in September at a theatre where another of his successful presentations was ending a long run. But before Simon could see his characters brought to life, there were parts to be cast, sets and costumes to be designed, rehearsals to be held and a provincial "try-out" run to be arranged. Fortunately, Hugo was eager to undertake the production and had no conflicting commitments.

One evening a few days after Linda's wedding, he came to dinner again and discussed some of the casting problems with Simon. Listening to them, Jan began to understand something of the complexity of the project.

"I don't think there's any question about who we want for the old man and the sister," Hugo said, over coffee. "I know Henry will be free, but I shall have to have a word with Janet's agent. I have an idea that she's just had an offer from Lister, so we may be too late to interest her. None of

the smaller parts is likely to present a serious problem. I may try the Forrester girl for Leonie. She did very well in *Mistral* last year, you remember. But our first concern, of course" – he rubbed the side of his nose with a forefinger – "is to find a couple of names for Edward and Marian."

"There's no chance of getting Stephen Lyall for Edward, I suppose?" Simon said, cocking an eyebrow.

Hugo smiled. "Yes – yes, I fancy there may be," he said, with a hopeful nod. "He's not tied up yet, as far as I know, that is – I think there may well be a chance of tempting him."

"And Marian?" Simon queried.

"Ah, that's a deal more ticklish," Hugo said thoughtfully. "In my opinion, there are only four actresses who are worth consideration – and three of them are committed. Catherine's still busy with *The Wilderness*, Ellen's doing another film and Diana is pregnant, I hear."

He pressed the tips of his fingers together and pursed his thin lips. "That only leaves Judith Cantley, and I can't say that prospect fills me with enthusiasm. She's good and she has the range, but if we get her it means that the rest of the cast will be at each other's throats before we get to Manchester. She has a genius for upsetting everyone."

"Mm, I'd heard she was a bit of a termagant," Simon said, grinning. "Not too promising, is it?"

There was silence while both men considered the problem of finding a suitable actress to play the lead.

"What about Venetia?" Jan said suddenly. She had not meant to say it aloud, but the thought had come into her head and slipped off her tongue before she was properly aware of having voiced it.

They both looked at her: Hugo with a glance that veered swiftly towards her husband, and Simon with an expression she could not interpret.

Jan flushed and bent her head over her sewing. "I'm sorry," she said uncomfortably. "I didn't mean to butt in. I haven't even read the play. It – it was probably a stupid suggestion."

"On the contrary, it was most pertinent. When I spoke of four actresses who were possibles, I hadn't considered Venetia," Hugo said reflectively. Again he glanced at Simon. "However, I doubt if she is disposed to return to the theatre at present and, even if she were, there are various other obstacles."

"Do you think she would take the part?" Simon asked abruptly.

Hugo shrugged. "It's possible."

"Then why not try her?"

Hugo's eyebrows arched. "I can try, certainly," he agreed. "But are you sure you want her for Marian?"

"If you approve, why should I raise any objection?" Simon said flatly, getting up to throw another log on the fire, for the evening was unseasonably chilly with a sharp wind blowing off the river.

The producer crossed his legs and contemplated the gleaming polish of his narrow, hand-made shoe, his thin, sensitive fingers drumming a soft tattoo on the arm of the chair.

"Very well, then," he said, at length. "I will suggest it to her and see if she is interested."

Later, when he had gone, Jan wondered if she had unwittingly done herself the gravest disservice. Simon had explained to her that, although the play was now out of his hands, he would probably be called in to make certain cuts or to write additional dialogue if Hugo felt that these would improve the pace of the production, or if they were necessitated by some technical difficulty. That meant that he would be bound to meet Venetia if she accepted the part.

Had that been why Hugo had appeared to expect him to reject the suggestion? she wondered. And had it also been the reason why Simon had accepted it? What a fool I am, she thought dismally. I suspect that my husband is still in love with another woman, and I actually suggest a situation in which he can't avoid seeing her! What a simpleton Hugo must think me. Oh, if only I knew why their engagement was broken and if Venetia still cares for him.

She heard no more of the matter until some ten days later, when they lunched with Hugo in the West End and he announced that both Stephen Lyall and Venetia had agreed to take the leading rôles, and that their contracts were already in preparation. The first reading of the play was to be held at Hugo's flat in a few days' time.

Simon had an appointment with his tailor that afternoon, so, taking his leave of them outside the restaurant, he left Jan and Hugo to walk leisurely across the square.

"You look pale, my dear. You should acquire some domestic help. That house is too large for you to manage single-handed," Hugo observed, as they waited to cross the road.

"I never have much colour, and it's been so hot this week," Jan said lightly.

Hugo agreed that the soaring temperature and the sultry stillness of the past few days did induce a feeling of lassitude. "Perhaps we shall have a storm to clear the air," he said, looking up at the sky which, clear and blue that morning, was now overcast with lowering clouds.

Yes – there must be a storm soon, Jan thought wryly. We can't go on for ever in this atmosphere of silent tension which becomes a little more unbearable with every day that passes. Eventually there must come a breaking point, and then – Oh, Simon, my darling, how can I live without you?

Hugo was not likely to have suspected it – because Simon had appeared to be in excellent spirits over lunch and Jan, too, had assumed a carefree manner – but the reason for the smudges under her eyes was that, yesterday, she and Simon had had their first real quarrel.

No: quarrel was the wrong word, she thought dully. There had been no raising of voices, no angry slamming of doors. It would have been better if there had. A really heated exchange of home truths might have eased the strain between them and even led to a degree of understanding.

What had happened was that, annoyed by a series of small domestic mishaps, she had broken a favourite vase, cut her hands on the pieces and found that there was no sticking

plaster in the house. Tired, and irritated by her own clumsiness, she had snapped at Simon for being late for lunch.

As soon as the hasty words were out, she had been appalled at the sharp petulance in her own voice. Simon had looked at her, his eyes as cold as a winter sea. Then he had sat down and eaten the lunch in a chilling silence that had made her feel like a bawling fishwife.

Later, she had gone down to the cellar where he was stripping paint from a serpentine chest of drawers found in a junk shop, and stammered an apology.

"That's all right. I'm sorry I kept you waiting," he had said quietly. But although he had patted her shoulder and asked if there was a cup of tea coming up, he had not attempted a warmer reconciliation.

Presently, unaware of his companion's sombre thoughts, Hugo said good-bye and turned up Regent Street, leaving Jan to wander aimlessly along Piccadilly. Looking at her reflection in the plate-glass windows, she realised how much she had changed in the past few months. Then, a cotton frock and low-heeled sandals would have seemed perfectly adequate for a summer afternoon's window-shopping. Now, not only because she had more money to spend on herself, but because she felt she owed it to Simon to be more meticulously groomed, she was wearing a trim linen suit, high heels and a flowery hat.

She was dawdling in the Burlington Arcade when a voice said, "Why, Mrs. Webster! How are you?" and, turning, she found an elegant woman of about thirty-five smiling at her.

"I don't think you remember me, do you? I'm Clarice Vane. We met at Naomi's party for Venetia Farr," the woman said, looking amused.

"Oh, yes, of course. I'm sorry, I was miles away," Jan said hastily, trying vainly to place Miss Vane's rather hard features among the many strange faces at the party.

"Oh, this weather! I feel like a rag — but you look deliciously cool," the older woman said, appraising Jan's clothes

in a way that suggested she was mentally calculating their cost. "I'm just going to find an iced drink. Are you in a rush, or would you care to join me?"

Since Jan had nothing to do till she met Simon at five, and because she was still feeling guilty at failing to recognise Miss Vane immediately, she agreed to the suggestion. The café which Miss Vane recommended was fan chilled and not too crowded. They chose a table beside a large tank of angel fish which added to the illusion of coolness, and ordered two iced coffees.

At first, the other woman talked about the heat wave and the coming holiday season and the superiority of Italian play-clothes. Then, after a pause while she lit a Turkish cigarette and Jan tried to remember whether she was an actress or had some other connection with the theatre, she said, "I hear Venetia is taking the lead in your husband's new play?"

Jan hesitated. She had supposed the matter was still a private one, and was reluctant to commit herself.

"Oh, there are no secrets in the theatre, my dear," Miss Vane said, with a laugh. "Everyone knows everything about everyone. Actually I had this news from Venetia herself. Tell me, how do you feel about her being offered the part?"

"I'm sure she'll be excellent in it. She's a very good actress," Jan said cautiously.

"Oh, yes – brilliant! Quite one of our best. It was a great loss when she ran off to Hollywood," her companion agreed, rather fulsomely. "But I must confess that, if I were you, I might be just the weeniest bit concerned about the choice."

Jan stiffened. "What do you mean?" she asked.

Miss Vane leaned forward and laid a hand on her arm. "I know it's not my business, my dear, but you're so very young and quite new to the ways of the theatre, I understand, so do take a word of warning from someone who knows it all too well." She broke off to flutter her fingers at an acquaintance who had passed by the window on to the street. "As you say, Venetia is a very clever actress and we all admire her for that," she continued, pausing a moment

as if to let the slight emphasis on the last two words take effect. "But I'm afraid that she's also quite shockingly unscrupulous in other ways, and when she wants something she doesn't mind what methods she uses to get it."

Jan's chin lifted and she gave the older woman a very direct look. "What are you trying to say, Miss Vane? Wouldn't it be better to come straight out with it rather than hinting?" she suggested coolly.

Clarice Vane looked ruffled for an instant. Then, with a rather brittle laugh, she said, "Very well, if you prefer it. You know, of course, that your husband was once . . . engaged to Venetia?"

Jan's heart missed a beat, but she said steadily, "Naturally I do. What has that to do with it?"

Miss Vane's eyebrows rose. "A very great deal, I imagine – if you know Venetia," she replied, with some irony. "She's always been a bad loser – both at bridge and what one might loosely call her affairs of the heart. Don't think, because Simon is so obviously devoted to you, my dear, that that will deter Venetia from . . . taking an interest in him again, shall we say. Oh, no! She may look like an angel, but she has the morals – or lack of them – of a trollop. When she wants something, or someone, she uses all her wiles to get them, and nine times out of ten she succeeds. Men, even the best of them" – her lips compressed in a hard line for an instant – "are never completely impervious to a woman like Venetia, you know."

Jan drew on her gloves and was surprised to find her hands so steady when, inwardly, she was shaking with rage.

"Don't you think it's rather unwise to make such damaging statements about Miss Farr?" she said icily. "The penalties for slander are quite severe, I believe."

The older woman stiffened. "You don't believe me?" she asked sharply.

Jan signalled to the waitress to bring the bill. "I neither believe nor disbelieve you, Miss Vane," she said, without expression. "I admire Miss Farr as an actress, but I am not

in the least interested in her private life – nor can I see any reason why I should be.”

Miss Vane was no longer keeping up her pretence of friendliness. Her eyes were hard and scornful and her lips twisted derisively as she said, “I suppose she went out of her way to be agreeable to you at that damned awful party, and you haven’t the sense to see through her. Well, if you take my advice, you’ll –”

“Don’t you find that it’s generally a waste of time to give advice – unless you’re asked for it?” Jan cut in. “I don’t know what your motive is, Miss Vane, but, frankly, it smacks strongly of the worst kind of mischief-making.”

“*Well!*” Beneath her heavy *maquillage*, Clarice Vane turned an unbecoming purple. “You needn’t think that because you’ve managed to catch someone like Simon Webster you can put on airs with me,” she said spitefully. “You don’t really think you can hold him if Venetia wants him back, do you? You won’t stand a chance! Well, don’t come running to me for help when you find she’s up to her tricks.”

The waitress brought the bill and gave a startled glance at the venomous expression on the face of the elder customer. When she had gone, Jan put a tip on the cloth and stood up.

“I can’t imagine any circumstances which would make me run to you for help, Miss Vane,” she said crisply. “In fact I very much hope that we never meet again. Good-bye!”

Outside the café, she walked swiftly away. It was not until she found herself in Grosvenor Square that she allowed her control to slacken. Finding an empty bench, she sank on to it, feeling quite sick with reaction.

The more she thought about the encounter, the more extraordinary it seemed. What had the woman hoped to gain by warning her against Venetia? Was she slightly mad, or was she one of those curiously perverted creatures whose chief delight was to stir up bad feeling?

By the time she met Simon Jan had recovered her composure, although the memory of the malice with which

Clarice Vane had delivered her final taunt still made her shudder.

"Simon, there was a woman at that party we went to — Clarice Vane. Do you know her?" she asked, as they were driving home.

"Yes, I know her. Why?"

"Oh . . . no particular reason. She spoke to me in the street this afternoon. I — I didn't like the look of her very much."

"I should hope not," he said, with a harsh laugh. "If she tries to get friendly, you'd better snub her."

"Oh, why? I mean is there something peculiar about her?"

"You just said you didn't like the look of her — nor do most people," he answered. "She's just rather objectionable, that's all."

Jan did not pursue the subject, but she could not help feeling that Simon had deliberately soft-pedalled his reaction to her mention of the woman, and that the whole episode had more significance than appeared on the surface.

Inevitably, Clarice Vane's scathing remarks about Venetia lingered in Jan's mind, and she began to wonder if, malicious and exaggerated as they had plainly been, there was an element of truth in them. What if Venetia's statuesque beauty did conceal a scheming and predatory nature? Then might not her own feeling of having no true right to be Simon's wife be utterly misplaced. Perhaps Simon had never loved Venetia in the truest sense, but had been the unwilling victim of a powerful infatuation from which he had finally broken free. Even if, after so long a separation, Venetia could still exert a strong attraction for him — that did not mean that he wanted to succumb to her again. He might even be glad that he was married so that he had the strongest possible incentive to resist her allure.

Or am I deluding myself? Jan wondered helplessly. For the two unassailable facts in a maelstrom of supposition and uncertainty were that, excluding the marriage vows, Simon had never declared his love for her, and that since their

honeymoon, his attitude to her had been strangely remote for a bridegroom of less than three months.

Jan had found that the only way to stop herself from brooding over these questions was to put all her energies into some kind of hard physical work. So, one afternoon when Simon was out, she changed into old clothes and set about distempering one of the attics which had not been included in the redecorations during their absence.

She was slapping on distemper, and getting a good deal of it on herself, when she heard the muffled ring of the doorbell. Reviling the untimely caller, she wiped her hands on her faded jeans and ran downstairs. Passing the hall mirror, she saw that there was a streak of distemper on her cheek and her hair was rumpled. Never mind: it's probably only the Kleeneze man or a meter reader, she thought hopefully.

But it was neither a persuasive salesman nor a representative of the Gas Board who stood on the doorstep, looking out over the river.

"Oh, hello! I was just beginning to think there was no one at home," Venetia said, turning round and removing her sun-glasses.

For a moment Jan could only gape at her. Then, horribly conscious of her scruffy appearance and distemper-smudged face, she stammered an apology and explained that she had been painting at the top of the house.

"So I see," said the actress, taking in the ancient jeans and the crumpled old shirt which had been washed but not ironed. She herself was wearing a dress of finely pleated ivory silk with long turquoise gloves and a shady hat of turquoise straw.

"I'm afraid Simon is out," Jan said awkwardly.

Venetia folded her glasses and slipped them into a shagreen case.

"I didn't come to see Simon. I wanted to have a talk with you," she said pleasantly.

CHAPTER VI

JAN'S first reaction was bewilderment, closely followed by embarrassed dismay at having to entertain a visitor when she was totally unprepared. Her expression must have reflected these feelings, as Venetia laughed and said, "Never mind. I've chosen a bad moment. I'll call another time."

"Oh, no — please. Now that you've come all this way, do come in. I'm very untidy but—"

"You ought to see me when I'm doing the chores. I look a positive scarecrow," Venetia said gaily, stepping into the hall. "Oh!" — as Jan opened the drawing-room door — "What a charming room — and what a lovely view you have, too."

"Yes, it is nice, isn't it," Jan said uncertainly. "W — would you excuse me for a moment? I'll just wash my hands. There are cigarettes on the table. Do help yourself."

Hurriedly making her escape, she dashed upstairs, tore off her working gear and had a hasty wash. Having changed into a clean gingham dress, brushed her hair and applied lipstick, she felt a little more equal to coping with her unexpected guest.

Deciding that it would take too long to make tea, she was thankful that there was a jug of pineapple cup in the refrigerator. Garnished with some slivers of lemon and mint leaves and set on a tray with her best lager glasses and a silver entrée dish filled with hastily cut chicken sandwiches — thank heaven they had had chicken yesterday and she was not obliged to resort to fish paste! — it was reasonably presentable as impromptu hospitality, she decided.

When she carried the tray into the drawing-room Venetia was sitting on the window seat. She had taken off her hat and gloves and was watching a skiff near the far bank.

"Oh my dear child, you really shouldn't have gone to so

much trouble — but how nice it looks. I expect you're wishing me at the bottom of the river — butting in when you're so busy."

"No, of course not. I was going to take a break soon anyway," Jan said shyly. "Distempering is quite tiring work in this weather."

Venetia accepted a glass of pineapple and a sandwich. "Mm — delicious!" she said, sipping the cold fruit juice. "Yes, I expect it is — painting, I mean. I've never had a chance to do any because I've never had a house of my own. I've always lived in flats, and in the States I had a furnished villa. It was quite attractive in its way — but not like a place of one's own."

She glanced about the room, her gaze lingering appreciatively on the pictures and ornaments. "What fun you must have had choosing everything. You make me very envious. Still, I suppose it's my own fault that I haven't a real home like this. You see, I used to think that my career was the most important thing in life. When I found out that it wasn't — well, by then it was too late."

There was a world of sadness in her tone, and, for a fleeting moment, her lovely expressive face held all the vain regret of someone whose life has been marred by an irretrievable mistake. Then she smiled and shrugged her shoulders and rose to examine a china figurine on the writing-desk.

"I suppose you are wondering why I've come here," she said presently, moving to the fireplace and closing her eyes to inhale the scent of the yellow roses in the green glass bowl.

"Perhaps it was wrong of me," she said slowly, "but I had so little chance to talk to you at the party, what with Hugo philosophising and such a tiresome crush of people. Oh, how tired I get of meeting no one but stage people all the time." She wandered to the bookcase and bent to examine the spines. "Somebody told me you lived by the river and it was so dreadfully stuffy in town that I couldn't resist the temptation to come out and find you. I hope you don't mind?"

"Why, no," Jan said carefully. "I — I'm always glad to see any of Simon's friends."

Venetia straightened and looked at her. "That's kind of you," she said gently. "I suppose most people would consider it rather poor taste on my part. But of course, you're not like the others. You know all about what happened years ago and that there's no reason for us to be enemies." She sighed, her mouth wistful. "I only wish they all did. But then I suppose it's one of the penalties of the job to have one's every action misinterpreted by people who are too shallow and small-minded to understand the truth." Again she laughed and shrugged her shoulders. "However, I didn't come here to rake over dead ashes. Tell me about yourself, Jan — I may call you that, mayn't I? I hear you are a superb cook."

"I like cooking," Jan admitted cautiously. She was remembering what Clarice Vane had said about Venetia's true character and wondering if, despite the woman's obvious malevolence, her warning had had some element of truth behind it.

Yet, meeting Venetia's candid blue eyes with their fringe of thick dark lashes, it was hard to believe that her frankness was just a mask, that the sweetness of her expression belied a cold, contriving nature.

She was roused from these reflections by the realisation that Venetia was comparing American food with English and suggesting that they ought to buy a barbecue and hold alfresco parties in the water-garden.

"I hadn't thought of that. It would be rather fun," Jan agreed. Then, "I suppose you'll be living in a hotel while you're here, Miss Farr."

"Oh, call me Venetia, won't you? Miss Farr sounds so formal. No, actually I'm thinking of renting a house. Hotels are such lonely places, so impersonal. It's silly, I suppose, but when I'm staying in a hotel I feel I'm just a room number: that if I was ill or died, they'd hurry me down the back stairs and open the windows and change the bed linen and

it would be just as if I'd never existed."

"I suppose they might if you were an ordinary person, but not when you're . . . who you are," Jan said, smiling a little.

Venetia made a wry mouth. "Being a film star doesn't guarantee one anything," she said drily. "Oh, people are eager to flatter and fawn as long as one is successful. But it's all cupboard love, you know; it doesn't really mean anything. I can count my real friends on the fingers of one hand."

"Yes, I can see that it's not all glamour, but would you want to change it?" Jan asked curiously. "Would you really want to be an ordinary person with an ordinary life?"

Venetia looked down at her hands. "I don't know perhaps if —" she broke off, and shrugged. "It's too late now, anyway. One can never go back on one's tracks."

There was a short pause while Jan wondered what she had been about to say before suddenly changing her mind. *Perhaps if Simon were free.* Had that been the thought in her mind?

"I wonder . . . I suppose you wouldn't let me see the rest of your house?" Venetia asked diffidently.

Jan hesitated. "Why, yes, if you like," she consented, after a moment.

Had Venetia been anyone else, Jan would have been delighted by the seemingly sincere admiration which the actress expressed as they toured the rooms. But as they lingered on the staircase for her guest to examine the flower prints which Jan had hung there, and spent several minutes in the spare bedroom while Venetia praised her choice of wallpaper and the professional finish of the home-made curtains and covers, Jan felt vaguely uneasy — as if, in allowing Venetia to see how they lived, she was guilty of some breach of loyalty to Simon. She wondered what would happen if he came home unexpectedly and found them in the master bedroom — his wife and the woman who had so

nearly been his wife. The thought was so disquieting that she almost hustled her guest downstairs again and was relieved when Venetia said it was time for her to go.

Less than ten minutes after the actress had left the house and while Jan was rinsing their glasses and folding the tray-cloth, the front door banged and Simon's footsteps crossed the hall.

"Finished the attic?" he asked, coming into the kitchen and putting a pile of library books on the dresser.

"No, not yet. I thought I'd leave it till it's cooler," Jan said nervously, wondering if he would notice the two glasses.

Simon opened the refrigerator and took out a can of beer. Then looking round for the tin opener, he stopped and sniffed, "I didn't know you used that scent," he said slowly.

She flushed. She had forgotten that Venetia had been wearing an unusual, rather musky scent, and that its fragrance still lingered on the air.

"I don't" she said quietly. "I — I've had a visitor."

Simon stiffened and, with a pang she saw that she had no need to tell him who it had been. Perhaps he had known as soon as he entered the house.

"Yes, Venetia," she said dully, as his eyebrows went up.

He found the opener and applied it to the rim of the can. "What was she doing here?" he said expressionlessly.

"She called. I don't think she had any special reason. Why — do you object?" she asked flatly.

He slipped the opener back on its hook and poured the beer into a glass. "Why should I?"

"I don't know. There are so many things I don't know," Jan said in a tight voice.

An instant later her wrists were clamped in an iron grip and Simon was glaring down at her with such ferocity that, instinctively, she shrank back against the table.

"And what is that supposed to mean?" he demanded tersely.

"Why, n-nothing, Simon. What's the matter? What have I done?" she asked fearfully.

The telephone began to ring and Simon made an exasperated sound and let her go. As the study door banged behind him, Jan nursed her reddened wrists and wondered if there was any way out of this impasse.

Coming downstairs next morning after a poor night, Jan found an airmail letter from Kenya on the doormat. The opening sentences of her sister's first letter from her new home made Jan's mouth twist in a wry smile.

"DEAREST JAN" (Linda had written in her swift sprawling hand):

"Everything is turning out marvellously! We had a blissful time at Malindi before coming up here, although I must admit my heart was rather in my boots on the last lap of the drive. Miles and miles of jolts and bumps on what passes for a road out here, and dust getting into everything – even my ears! Thank goodness I brought plenty of face creams with me. The women who haven't bothered to look after their complexions look like yellow lizards, poor things.

"The house isn't nearly as bad as Joe made out. Not quite up to a *House and Garden* conception of gracious living, but with great possibilities. Everything is so new and there is so much to learn that I haven't had a moment to be bored.

"Joe is even more wonderful than I thought. When I think of all those dreary creatures who used to take me about, and then look at him, I think I must have been mad. Those ridiculous bowler hats and umbrellas! Joe lives in a bush shirt and shorts now and looks absolutely marvellous – the way a man *should* look. I never realised before how civilisation ruins people. All the same, I don't intend to get too primitive myself. I adore Joe striding about like Tarzan, but if *I* go into shorts, they will be strictly the *Vogue* variety."

The rest of the letter was in the same lyrical vein, and

although she was delighted to hear that her sister was settling in so happily, Jan could not repress a small sigh of envy. Her own marriage, which had seemed to have everything in its favour, was proving to be a much thornier path than the one Linda had chosen to tread.

Visiting her mother, later in the day, she found that the Meldrums had also received a rapturous account of Linda's experiences.

"All the same, I should have felt much happier if she had married Mark," said her mother. "Naturally she's enjoying life now. But will she feel the same in five years' time? The most important factor in any successful marriage is having something in common — either background or interests."

"If that is true, then both Linda and I are doomed to failure," Jan said quietly.

"No, your marriage is entirely different from Linda's," her mother declared. "I admit that I was not entirely in favour of it at the beginning, but I hadn't had time to think about it clearly."

"What do you mean, Mother?"

"Well, marriages like your father's and mine, in which both partners have equally forceful temperaments and at least one absorbing interest outside the domestic sphere, are comparatively rare," Leila said thoughtfully. "I could never have endured a life which was limited to having children and looking after a house, and Paul has always known that and accepted my need to have something more stimulating than domestic affairs to keep me interested. We are equal partners and we have always had a certain degree of independence. But in most marriages one partner is the stronger, more dominant character. I think Linda needs more from life than Joe, while where your marriage is concerned, Simon is the leader and you are quite content to be the secondary influence in the home. There's always a greater chance of success when the woman takes second place. A positive and a negative are generally far better suited than two positives."

"So I'm a negative," Jan said drily.

"I don't mean that in any detrimental sense, darling," her mother said hastily.

"No, I know you didn't," Jan said, smiling. "I expect you're right. I've never really thought about it in that way."

On the way home, she considered her mother's theory. The idea that one person must always be the weaker did not greatly appeal to her. She had always thought that, in a really good marriage, husband and wife should be complementary. But I suppose I am a negative, she thought with some depression. Perhaps I'm so negative that I should have married another negative like poor George Baker.

After supper. Simon cut the grass in the water-garden and Jan sat on one of the window seats in the drawing-room and worked on a tapestry cover for a foot-stool. It was not until he came into the house and had a bath and settled down in his chair with a book that she wondered if part of her failure to please him was her lack of erudition. Perhaps she should spend more time studying world affairs and perusing intellectual journals to make her conversation more interesting. Perhaps she bored him. Yet Paula Davison was not a particularly clever person, and she did not bore Ben who was quite a scholarly man.

Later, after she had made coffee and Simon had eaten the remaining portion of an apple tart, he said, "Come and sit here for a while," and drew her down on to the floor against his knees.

"You've been very quiet all evening. What are you thinking about?" he asked, his hand on her head.

"Simon, do you find me a very negative sort of person?" she asked abruptly, not looking at him.

"What on earth put that idea into your head?" he asked, sounding amused.

He was stroking her hair now, and she thought the casual absent-minded caress was the way one would treat a pet animal.

"Mother did. She was talking about our marriage this

afternoon. She said you were positive and I was negative."

"Do you think she was right?"

"I—I don't know. Do you?"

"Perhaps. It depends what aspect of marriage she was referring to. You are positive enough over certain things," he said, in an odd tone.

"What does that mean?"

He smiled, but she noticed that it did not reach his eyes. "As far as the practical side of it goes, I would say you're extremely positive," he said. "I doubt if there was ever a wife of your limited span who ran things so efficiently. Nothing is ever burnt or wasted; my shirts are always clean, my socks always darned. You're a model bride in that respect, sweetheart."

She swallowed, her hands tightly locked round her knees. "But not in other ways."

He shrugged. "Never having been married before, I wouldn't know."

There was silence until Jan got up to remove their coffee cups.

"Oh, leave them till tomorrow. We've got some clean ones for breakfast, haven't we?" Simon said with sudden impatience. And then, before Jan had time to answer, he said quickly, "No, do them if you like. It doesn't matter. I'll come up later. I want to finish this chapter."

She was still awake when, some time after midnight, she heard him switch out the landing light. But although the moonlight was falling across her pillow and her eyes were open, he did not speak to her, and presently she heard his breathing quieten into the steady rhythm of sleep.

About a fortnight before, Simon had accepted an invitation to spend the following week-end at a large country house in Berkshire. It belonged to a middle-aged actress and her husband, and, having met them at the reception for Venetia, Jan had agreed that it would be pleasant to get out of London for a few days.

So, on Friday afternoon, they locked up the house and

drove away from the riverside, arriving at their destination in time to be shown round the gardens before changing for dinner.

Their hostess, Ellen Mortimer, was a charming, grey-haired woman in her middle fifties who, besides establishing a reputation as a fine character actress over a period of thirty years, had managed to combine an unusually happy marriage with her work in the theatre. Her husband, Robert Mortimer, was a director of several companies and their two sons were both doctors.

"I'm so glad you could come, my dear," Mrs. Mortimer said, as they walked round the rose garden. "I hear your house is delightful, but even living on the river is not quite the same as being in the real country at this time of year. Our other guests haven't arrived yet, but you know Hugo Sallender, of course, and I think you'll like the Allenburys. John is in one of the Ministries – I always forget which one – and Mary Allenbury is such a sweet person. She and I were at school together and we've never lost touch. I hope you won't be bored – being surrounded by old fogies. However, James, that's my younger son, is bringing his wife over tomorrow, so you won't be completely outnumbered."

"I couldn't possibly be bored here," Jan said warmly, looking back at the gracious old house, which stood in the midst of pine woods and had one of the loveliest gardens she had ever seen. "Does your son live far away, Mrs. Mortimer?"

"Yes, up in Sheffield, unfortunately," her hostess explained. "But perhaps it's just as well. With such a distance between us, I can't be tempted to become an interfering mother-in-law. His wife, Julie, was on the stage before they married. The reason they're spending their holiday here this year is that she's expecting a baby in September and they're trying to economise as far as possible. James has only recently set up in practice and they have to go carefully for the first few years."

"Will she go back to the stage when the baby is born, do you think?"

"No, I don't think so. She was never very ambitious, although she has a good deal of talent. I think she'll be quite happy looking after James and the infant."

Jan enjoyed the evening, which passed in leisurely conversation on the terrace. It was not until she was getting ready for bed — Simon was still downstairs talking to their host — that she realised that it had been a relief not to be alone with Simon. The thought filled her with guilt, and she wondered unhappily if he, too, found her society a strain.

When James and Julie Mortimer arrived next day, Jan took an immediate liking to the other girl. But it pained her to see them catching each other's eyes during the afternoon and exchanging silent messages of love and understanding. She and Simon had no such tender code between them.

Simon had told her to bring a bathing suit with her, as there was a pool in the garden, and, about three, everyone except Julie changed into swim suits.

"Will you be too hot there, darling?" James asked his wife, setting up a deck chair for her at the pool's edge.

"No, I'm fine," Julie said cheerfully. "I adore hot weather. The tropics would suit me perfectly," she added to Jan, who was standing near them. Then, "Oh, look, your husband is going to dive."

Jan turned and saw Simon standing at the top of the diving board, his shoulders bronze in the sunlight. Then, in a downward arc, he cut cleanly into the clear, blue water and surfaced again, his dark hair glistening. A moment later he was hauling himself out of the pool and strolling towards them, his muscles rippling under his smooth, brown skin.

"Marvellous," he said. "Coming in, Jan?"

She nodded, taking off her wrist watch.

"Are you a good swimmer, Mrs. Webster?" James asked.

"I like it," she said. "I'm not particularly good."

"You couldn't be worse than James," Julie said, laughing.

Her husband scowled at her in mock annoyance and then ran across the grass and took a header, sending up showers of spray. Simon followed him, swimming the breadth of the pool under water. By the time he had reached the opposite side Jan had climbed the board and was standing on the top adjusting her cap. Aware that he was watching her, she pulled the strap tight, took a deep breath and dived into the cool depths.

"You never told me you could swim like that," Simon said, when she came up close to the rail.

"You didn't ask me."

His teeth flashed in a grin. "Race you across," he said.

They touched the other side at the same moment and Simon climbed out, reaching down a strong hand to pull her up beside him.

"You're very good," he said quietly, appraising her slim grace in the brief green suit.

For an instant, the admiration in his eyes sent a thrill of delight through her. Then she realised that it was only her prowess in the water that he admired.

She smiled and turned away to join the others, knowing that he would have looked as approvingly at anyone who could dive as well as himself and swim as strongly over a short distance.

Tea was brought out to the pool and Jan sat with her legs dangling in the water and a sandwich in her hand, her thoughts too heavy for the brightness of the day.

"Don't get a chill in that wet suit. Shall I get you a towel?" Simon asked, setting a bowl of strawberries and cream on the tiles.

"I'm all right." She had tugged off her cap and her hair was rumpled and a little damp.

He sat down beside her, smoking a cigarette and watching her eat the strawberries. They were freshly picked and delicious with the thick whipped cream.

"Is that the only thing I don't know about you — that you can swim like a mermaid?" he asked, keeping his voice low

so that the others would not hear.

"I think so. What else could there be?"

"I'm beginning to wonder."

Jan was still in the water when the others began to drift back to the house. She turned on to her back, floating, her arms outstretched, the sun on her closed eyelids. She did not know where Simon was: probably with the rest of them. The sensation of being alone lulled her. She would have liked to go on floating there till the sun went down. It was very peaceful.

Suddenly there was a commotion in the water beside her.

"It's time you came out. You'll get cold," Simon said, treading water.

"Not for a minute. You go on. I shan't be long." She turned away from him and began to swim lazily towards the shallows.

The next moment his arms were round her waist and he was hauling her against him. Instinctively, Jan struggled. But her arms were securely pinioned, and to save herself going under she had to relax.

"Oh, Simon, you'll —" Her protest was lost as his hold tightened and he kissed her.

"What a very peculiar place to try to kiss someone," she said when, a few minutes later, they climbed out by the steps. She was breathless and a good deal flustered, her heart hammering against her ribs.

"Do you think so?" Simon picked up a towel from the grass and draped it about her shoulders. His eyes were teasing and friendly.

With a sudden surge of excitement, Jan wondered if something had happened to change his feelings towards her.

Julie was sitting on the terrace. "You are a couple of water babies," she said, smiling. Then, as a car could be heard drawing up to the front of the house. "Oh lord, who have we here, I wonder? Somebody boring, I expect. Unexpected arrivals usually are."

They chatted to her for a while and Jan was happily conscious of Simon's hand on her shoulder. She was half afraid to go upstairs to change for fear that, once they were alone again, the new way he had looked at her would fade.

Presently Mr. Mortimer came through the drawing-room windows to join them.

"Who's descended on us?" Julie asked.

"Oh, some stage crony of Ellen's," her father-in-law said vaguely. "She's been looking at a house which is up for sale near here and called in on her way back to town. I suppose she'll stay for dinner. You probably know her, Julie. A tall, very striking-looking girl with blonde hair."

"There are dozens of blondes in the theatre," Julie said, amused. "What's this vision's name?"

Mr. Mortimer was searching for his pipe which he had mislaid before lunch. "Oh . . . Veronica or Verbena something," he said carelessly, delving under cushions. "No, no. Verbena is those bath salts I gave Ellen for Christmas. Venetia — that's it. Venetia Farr or Parr."

"Farr," Julie corrected. She made no comment, but it was plain from her expression that this particular "vision" was none too welcome.

Jan looked at Simon, and her heart sank. His mouth was set hard, his jaw taut. "I'm going up to change," he said briefly, and walked away.

When Mr. Mortimer had finally discovered his pipe under a magazine and retired indoors again, Julie stretched herself and said, "I do wish babies weren't so huge. I feel enormous already, and I shall be like a whale by September."

Jan managed a smile. "If Mrs. Mortimer hadn't told me, I wouldn't have guessed you were having a baby. I was thinking earlier on how nice you look."

Indeed, in her Empire-style dress of blue-and-white spotted cotton and with her curly brown hair held by a pearly Alice band, Julie did look attractively cool and pretty.

"I must say I do *feel* marvellous," she admitted. "So far, the whole thing has gone swimmingly. I've had none of

the ghastly symptoms that some old dears revel in warning one about." She laughed. "Which is just as well, I suppose, since dear James wants at least four offspring. Do you like children?"

"Yes, very much – although I'm not sure I could cope with four," Jan replied lightly.

Julie opened her bag and began to powder her nose. "It's nice of you to say I don't look too bad – because I shall feel positively cow-like when the fair Venetia floats on to the scene," she remarked wryly. "You know her, I suppose? What do you make of her?"

Jan did not reply at once, and Julie grinned. "Don't try to be tactful. It's written in your face." She smoothed an eyebrow. "It's not that I mind other women being better looking. James isn't the type who has to be kept on a tight rein, and glamour girls rather frighten him," she went on. "But there's something about La Farr that makes my toes curl. She looks so darned sure of herself. Oh – here they come."

Jan turned round and saw her hostess bringing Venetia round the corner of the terrace. Today the actress was dressed in a sleeveless white silk blouse and a skirt of coffee linen. The jacket to match the skirt was draped over her arm and a scarf of matt white chiffon was wound round her head and throat in wimple fashion. An amber drop on a fine gold chain hung from her throat and she wore amber calf shoes.

"Why, hello – what a pleasant surprise!" she said, smiling at Jan. "Is Simon here, too? Oh, good. I've been rather wanting to talk to him. Hello, Julie. How are you? Tired by this awful hot weather, I expect. Your mamma-in-law has told me the exciting news. What a pretty maternity dress. Most of them are so dreary, aren't they? Not that one can expect to look one's best, I suppose."

Jan excused herself to run up and change. Had Venetia's remarks been merely tactless, or deliberately hurtful?

The bedroom was empty and Simon's swimming trunks

were draped on the edge of the bath. Remembering that unexpected moment of harmony between them after his kiss in the pool, she felt a spasm of fury at Venetia's ability to destroy it so easily. Damn her: why had she had to come here at that particular moment? Could she possibly have known that they were spending the week-end with the Mortimers, and made house-hunting a pretext for her visit? Oh, surely not. It must be one of those unfortunate strokes of chance.

The atmosphere in the dining-room that evening was subtly different from that of the previous night. Venetia's presence seemed to charge the air with a kind of electric force, but, if the actress was aware that two people – Hugo and Julie – disliked her and another had every reason to do so, she seemed totally unconscious of it.

After the meal the party adjourned to the terrace again. Jan noticed that Simon drank his coffee standing up and smoked three cigarettes in succession.

Presently the conversation turned to his new play, and Venetia took advantage of this to say, "I've been going over my part, Simon. There's something I'd like to ask you. Rather than boring the others with too much shop talk, could we take a turn round the garden – if you don't mind, Ellen? I won't keep him long." And, jumping up, she began to walk down the steps to the lawn, making it impossible for Simon to reject the suggestion.

There was silence for some minutes as they moved away, and Jan wondered if the others were secretly pitying her. Hoping her interested tone did not sound too false, she began to question her host about his vegetable garden, knowing that this was one of his major interests.

Mrs. Mortimer had taken Mary Allenbury into the house to show her something, and Hugo and Mr. Allenbury and the younger Mortimers were playing bridge in the drawing-room when Jan saw the gleam of Venetia's hair on the shrubbery path. The actress's *tête-à-tête* with Simon had lasted nearly half an hour, and, as it was growing dusk, it was not until they neared the house that Jan saw that

Venetia's arm was linked with Simon's, her hand lying palely on the black baratheia of his sleeve.

At the foot of the terrace steps, Venetia withdrew her arm and moved slightly ahead of him.

"I think we'd better be going in, my dear," Mr. Mortimer said to Jan. "It's getting too chilly for you to sit out without a coat." He stood aside for the two women to precede him through the french windows and, as Venetia moved into the light, Jan saw that the actress's lipstick was slightly smudged and there was a strange glitter in her slanting blue eyes.

The others were at an exciting stage of the game, and did not look up immediately. With a murmured excuse, Venetia passed through to the hall — presumably to repair her make-up before they should see it, Jan thought angrily.

Her hands clenched. How dare Simon kiss Venetia, when less than six hours ago he had been kissing her? Even if he was still in love with the other woman, even if their walk in the dusky shrubberies had offered an overwhelming temptation to hold her in his arms again — it was insupportable that he should bring her back to the house with the evidence of what had passed so plain that everyone could have seen it.

"Mrs. Mortimer, would you mind if I went to bed now? I — I have a slight headache," she said dully, as the hostess reappeared.

"Of course not, my dear. Let me find you some aspirin. Perhaps you stayed in the water too long this afternoon," her hostess said anxiously.

"Yes, perhaps I did. I have some aspirins, thank you. Good night, everyone," Jan said quickly, as, without looking at her husband, she hurried from the room.

She was in her nightdress and about to clean her teeth when she heard voices below the window. The room overlooked the drive and, switching off the lights, she drew back the curtains and looked down. Venetia was climbing into her car and her host and hostess were seeing her off, but there was no sign of Simon.

Presently, lying in bed, she wondered if she had been too

harsh in her judgement of him. The fact that Venetia's lipstick had been smudged was not positive proof that anything had happened in the garden. She could even have done it herself – if she were vicious enough to use such a device. Yet that day when she had called at the house she had seemed so sincere, so . . . so nice.

Oh, what *am* I to think? Jan asked herself forlornly.

There was a tap at the door and Simon came in. "Are you all right? Can I get you anything?" he asked, with what seemed to be genuine concern.

Jan shook her head. "It's nothing. I'll be fine in the morning," she said tonelessly.

He hesitated a moment, frowning slightly. Then he nodded. "Try to get to sleep," he said. "I won't disturb you when I come up. Good night."

Listening to his footsteps receding along the landing, Jan knew that they were back where they had been before the week-end. Whatever fleeting warmth he had felt for her during the afternoon had been extinguished again. But whether by Venetia or by something in himself, she had no means of knowing.

They returned home the following afternoon and several days passed without incident, except that the unspoken estrangement between them grew hourly more hard to support. Jan found that her nerves were now so taut that the sudden hooting of a barge on the river would make her jump and gasp. The house, once the fulcrum of so many happy hours, had become a prison.

On Wednesday, the day she usually looked in on her parents, she told Simon she would probably have supper with them and perhaps go to the pictures with Marigold. Simon accepted the suggestion without comment. He might, he said, go out himself for an hour or two. Perhaps to see Hugo or to drive into the country.

It was more than a month since Jan had seen her sister, and now that they were living apart they seemed to have more to say to each other. But for the persistent ache inside her, Jan

would have enjoyed their evening together.

It was nearly eleven when she reached home, to find the house still empty. After drinking a glass of milk, she went to bed. Of late she had slept so badly that she had difficulty in rising in the morning and felt drained of vitality until nearly noon. Tonight her insomnia seemed worse than ever. Even when she did sleep it was only to dream strange fantasies in which, dressed in bridal white, she was forced back by an unseen power while Simon walked up the aisle with Venetia triumphant on his arm.

A little after midnight, the sudden shrilling of the door bell made her start up in fear. It could not be Simon, who had his own key. Scrambling out of bed, she snatched up her dressing-gown and hurried downstairs.

"Mrs. Webster?" The middle-aged policeman stepped into the hall and removed his helmet. "I'm afraid there's been a slight accident, ma'am."

"An accident?" Her hand flew to her throat and she paled.

"Now don't upset yourself, ma'am. There's no cause for alarm. Your husband's had a bit of a mishap in his car. We thought you might wonder where he was. They may have to keep him at the hospital for a little while, you see."

"But what's happened? Which hospital?" Jan asked huskily. "Is he badly hurt?"

"I don't think so, ma'am. All the same it might be best for you to come along with us. He'll be glad to have you with him, no doubt."

"Yes — yes, of course. I won't take a minute," she agreed hastily.

When she was ready the constable ushered her out to the waiting patrol car. "There aren't many ladies can get dressed as quickly as that, ma'am," he said jovially.

Something in his manner convinced her that the matter was more serious than he wanted her to think.

"Please — you must tell me — what has happened to my husband? I won't panic, I promise," she said urgently.

"Well, ma'am, we haven't had all the particulars, you

understand, but it seems Mr. Webster's vehicle was in collision with another car on the Linton bypass."

"Linton? But that's miles away."

"About an hour's drive, ma'am," the policeman agreed.

Jan tensed. Surely, if Simon was only slightly hurt, they would telephone from the hospital — not send a police car to rush her to his side?

"He — he's not dead, is he?" she said in a small, chilled voice.

"Gracious me, no! Nothing like that, my dear," the constable said, shocked.

He told her as much as he could, but it was not very much and not very reassuring. Afterwards, she remembered that drive through the night as one of the worst ordeals of her life. She supposed that the driver was going as fast as he could, but the car seemed to be crawling, and a terrible vision of Simon lying desperately ill hovered over her.

"Dear God, don't let him die. I'll never ask for anything else if only you can keep Simon alive," she prayed desperately.

At last they reached the hospital where Simon had been taken, and, almost before the car had drawn to a standstill, Jan flung open the door and ran up the steps to the entrance. The porter at the desk was maddeningly slow. First he insisted on showing her to a small waiting-room and then he stumped away to fetch someone to see her.

It was several minutes, and every second an agony, before light brisk footsteps sounded outside and the door was opened by a grey-haired woman in the neat dark uniform of a Sister.

"I'm sorry to keep you waiting, Mrs. Webster. There's no need to look so anxious. Your husband has had a nasty accident, but there is every hope that he will recover without any permanent disability," she said at once. "His condition on arrival seemed such that it was wise to have you brought here, but his injuries now appear to be less than was feared. I assure you he will be all right."

Jan leaned against the wall and let out a long breath of relief. The Sister gave her a moment or two to recover herself.

"Can – can I see him?" Jan asked presently.

"In a little while. He is still having attention," the older woman explained. "Fortunately your husband appears to be a very healthy young man, so he will probably recover much more quickly than another person in the same circumstances. Miss Farr, too, has only minor injuries."

"Miss Farr?"

"Yes. Miss Venetia Farr. She was in the car with him, and we may need to keep her here for a few days, although she escaped more lightly than your husband."

CHAPTER VII

"Oh! . . . I see. I – I didn't know," Jan said tonelessly.

Suddenly the strong white light of the fluorescent tubes seemed unbearably bright and the pervasive odours of floor polish and disinfectant sent a spasm of nausea through her. She closed her eyes, trying to collect herself.

The Sister, thinking she was about to faint, made her sit down and pushed her head forward, at the same time pressing a bell in the wall.

"Now there's no need to upset yourself, my dear," she said kindly, when she judged it safe to let Jan sit up again. "You won't help your husband by giving way, you know. He'll need you to cheer him up."

There was a tap at the door, and a pretty young nurse came in. The Sister gave her some instructions in a lowered voice and she nodded and disappeared, returning after a very few minutes with a glass in her hand.

Jan drank the contents without demur, too numb to care what it was.

"And Ven – Miss Farr?" she asked, after a moment. "Is she badly hurt?"

"No, fortunately she was scarcely hurt at all. Just bruised and shaken up," the Sister said. "Perhaps, as she is a friend of yours, you can help us to contact her relatives. She says there is no one to be notified, but she's not quite herself, and I feel sure there must be someone who should be told."

Jan swallowed. "No . . . I'm afraid I can't help you," she said dully. "I don't know anything about her family. Perhaps if you could get in touch with her agent, he might be able to help. But I don't even know who he is. I'm sorry."

"Well, never mind; I expect we'll hear of someone presently," the Sister said more briskly. "Feeling better? Good."

Then I'll leave you to rest for a while. Don't worry; we'll let you see your husband as soon as we can." And, with an encouraging pat on Jan's shoulder, she bustled out of the room, her heels squeaking a little on the polished cork tiles.

It must have been about half an hour later – although, to Jan, each minute seemed a slow eternity – that the door opened again and Hugo Sallender came in.

"They told me I'd find you in here. No, don't move. You must be very tired. Thank God it's nothing more serious," he said quickly, taking her cold hand and pressing it comfortably between his own. "I came as quickly as I could. I thought you might like someone with you. The hospital atmosphere can be rather alarming to an outsider."

"Oh, Hugo, how kind of you," Jan said warmly. Tears pricked her eyes and she blinked them back, restraining a strong impulse to fling herself into his arms and weep out her bewilderment and anxiety. "But how did you know about it?" she asked perplexedly.

"The local freelance must have got it from the police and phoned through to the nationals. At any rate, they started ringing me up an hour ago. I expect they're still at it," he explained.

"Do they – do they know about Venetia?" Jan asked.

"Venetia?"

"She was with Simon when it happened."

Hugo's thin lips compressed and a curious glitter lit his dark eyes, but he said quietly, "I see. No, they didn't mention that she was involved." He paused for a moment, then said in a harder tone, "I suppose she has come through with a couple of scratches and a headache."

"Why do you say that?"

Hugo shrugged. "The Venetias of this world invariably emerge from every contingency with the minimum of injury," he said cuttingly.

Jan gripped the handkerchief which she had been twisting round her fingers. "I – I didn't know they were to-

gether," she said flatly. "I thought Simon had gone to see the Davisons."

Hugo said nothing for a moment. Then he began to take off his coat and unwind his foulard scarf. "Well, no doubt he will explain it all as soon as he comes round," he remarked calmly, as if he saw nothing peculiar in these circumstances.

Presently a tall, sandy-haired young man in a white coat came into the room and introduced himself as Doctor Langley.

"Your husband is still unconscious, Mrs. Webster, and probably won't come round for an hour or two yet. But if it will reassure you we can let you have a peep at him," he said cheerfully.

"Oh, yes — it would," Jan said eagerly, and, leaving Hugo in the waiting-room, she followed the doctor along the corridor.

Simon was not in one of the wards, but in a small private room.

"Just for tonight. We're pretty full up at the moment," Doctor Langley explained, in case this should cause her any further alarm.

Opening the door, he stood aside and gestured for her to enter. A nurse was doing something with some equipment on the trolley beside the bed, but she moved back into the shadows as Jan approached the foot rail. A soft light above the headboard shone on Simon's face, and, with a stifled murmur of compassion, Jan saw that his left cheekbone was badly contused and there was a long strip of plaster on his forehead.

"Don't let the bruises scare you. They'll be healed in a couple of days and the gash on his forehead is not very deep," the doctor said quietly at her elbow. "With any luck, he'll be sitting up and polishing off a good breakfast in twelve hours' time."

"Really?" Jan asked pleadingly, her eyes anguished.

"Well, maybe he won't have quite his usual appetite —

but I think he'll be pretty fit," the young man reassured her.

She hesitated. "Can — can I touch him?" she asked diffidently.

He nodded and turned away towards the window, perhaps guessing her thought. Slowly Jan walked round the bed and looked down at her husband's unconscious face. Oblivion had removed the lines of maturity from his face and he looked very young. In some curious way the ugly bruise on his cheek and the crooked plaster seemed to emphasise the strength and clarity of the underlying bone structure and the firm contours of his mouth. Quickly, aware of the nurse in the background, she bent and brushed her lips lightly against his unharmed cheek. Then, with a last look, she followed the doctor back into the corridor.

"I don't suppose you've had time to make any plans, but there's quite a good pub in the town which I can recommend for you to put up at," Doctor Langley said, as they rejoined Hugo. "But perhaps, if you've any youngsters, you'll want to get back to London and come down again tomorrow."

"No, we haven't any children. I'd rather stay close to the hospital," Jan said swiftly.

"I'll give you the address, then. Don't worry about knocking the owners up. They've had visitors in similar circumstances before now, and they're very understanding," he said, jotting the name of the inn on a slip of paper. "Are you planning to stay here too, Mr. Sallender?"

"At least for tonight," Hugo said.

"Oh, good. It's always helpful to have a friend about at these times," the doctor remarked, with a professional glance at Jan's drawn face. "If you'd like to hang on a moment, I'll get Mrs. Webster a couple of tablets to help her sleep."

To add to his kindnesses, the doctor telephoned the proprietor of the inn which he had recommended, so that when Hugo steered his car into the old coaching yard the landlord and his wife were waiting for them.

"Oh, we're used to this, unfortunately," his wife told Jan, as she showed her to a comfortable bedroom where an electric fire had been lit. "It's a very dangerous stretch of road where your husband had his accident. There've been more than a dozen accidents there in the past two years. Time they did something about it, if you ask me — although the speed some people drive, it's not to be wondered at really. However, I dare say it wasn't your hubby's fault. A careful driver, is he? There now, it's usually the careful ones who come off worst, I've found. The hospital people often send the relatives to us. We're not so dear as the big hotels, you see, and closer at hand for visiting. But I dare say your man will be up and about quite soon, so you won't be with us for long. Now, if there's anything you want, you just say, my dear. You're welcome to one of my nightdresses, and we always keep some spare toothbrushes."

Such ready kindness at such an hour of night was doubly heart-warming, and Jan said so.

The landlady brushed aside her gratitude. "It's a poor look-out if we can't help each other out of a muddle now and then," she said kindly. "Do as you would be done by — that's my motto. It's a pity more people don't take to it. Maybe the world wouldn't be in such a dreadful state as it is. All these atom bombs and rockets!" She clicked her tongue disapprovingly. "Whatever is the use of getting up to the moon if we can't live comfortably together down here? Still, this is no time for me to be chattering about all that rubbish. You get to bed, my dear. There's nothing like sleep for making you feel yourself again."

As she climbed between the cool, clean sheets and switched off the bedside lamp, Jan was afraid that it would be a wakeful and restive night. But the tablets which Doctor Langley had given her quickly took effect and she had scarcely tucked herself in before she was soundly asleep.

When she awoke the sun was shining, and a large ginger cat was basking on her window ledge, having climbed there from the roof of an outhouse a few feet below. She washed

and dressed in haste, having forgotten to wind her watch and not knowing what time it was. Then, followed by the friendly cat, she went downstairs.

The landlord, busy at his desk, bade her a cordial good morning and said that Mr. Sallender was at breakfast.

"You had a good night, I hope, madam?" he said, showing her the way.

"Yes, very good. The doctor gave me some pills and I slept like a log. I hope you and your wife got back to sleep all right after being disturbed."

"Oh, yes, we're always sound sleepers," he said cheerfully. "Don't you worry your head about that."

Hugo, an earlier riser, had reached the toast stage when they entered the dining-room. He rose to pull out a chair for her and repeated the landlord's enquiry about her sleep.

"What a nice couple they are. I hope they do well here," Jan said, as their host departed to fetch her breakfast. The establishment, which seemed to have about eight bedrooms, was evidently run by the couple and their two daughters and catered mainly for commercial travellers, Hugo had gathered.

"Yes, exceptionally pleasant," he agreed. "By the way, I've already rung up the hospital to enquire about Simon. I'm afraid he's still out for the count, my dear, but they assure me there's no cause for alarm. They suggest we wait here till they have some news for us. There's nothing we can do if we do go up."

Jan was naturally disheartened at this piece of news, but she did her best to hide her worry from him, making a brave attempt to talk of other matters.

When they had finished breakfast the landlord suggested that they might like to sit out in the small garden behind the premises. There was no danger of the telephone ringing without someone hearing it, he assured them.

They had been sitting in the sun for some time, and the ginger cat had installed itself on Jan's lap and was kneading its paws on her leg with loud purrs, when she said suddenly, "Hugo — you told me once that you pitied Venetia because

she was caught in her own snare. What did you mean by that?"

Hugo put down his paper and removed his sun-glasses. "You may remember that I also said that some actors lose the faculty for knowing what is real and what is only pretence," he said slowly.

"Yes, I remember. It was the same night."

"Well, Venetia is a case in point. She meets someone and wants them to like her, so she instinctively acts a part that she knows will please them. After a while she grows tired of the rôle in which she has cast herself and assumes another one. She is never really herself."

There was a silence while the cat wound itself into a coil and a fitful breeze stirred the wistaria behind them.

Then Jan said, "She came to see me, you know. I – I thought it rather strange."

"Yes, I imagine you did," Hugo said, looking interested. "I suppose she played a part for you. How did she go about it?"

"She was charming. She admired the house and talked about furniture and cooking – and about the . . . the emptiness of her own life. I felt rather sorry for her."

"A *tour de force*, one gathers," Hugo said drily. "I'm quite sure Venetia has no real interest in furniture or cookery – and as for the emptiness of her life . . ." He broke off, smiling very sardonically.

"Hugo – perhaps I shouldn't ask this – but why did she marry that old man? Why did she break it off with Simon?" Jan asked impulsively. Her colour rose under his searching glance. "I know it's all in the past and not really my business," she went on quickly, "but . . . well, Simon never speaks of it, and . . . and I can't help wondering."

"The answer to your first question is simple enough, I fancy," he replied thoughtfully. "There are scores of actresses who would marry a man like Leon if the opportunity offered. As for the other – that I can't say. I never approved of the engagement and was greatly relieved when it was broken,

but I have no idea what caused the break."

"But it *was* Venetia who broke it?" Jan persisted, hating herself for questioning him like this yet impelled by the force of weeks of unsatisfied conjecture.

"Officially – yes. Privately – I don't know," he answered.

Jan's fingers smoothed the cat's soft fur and she watched a sparrow hopping over the grass. "Was – was he very much in love with her?" she asked in a strained voice.

"Yes, I think he was," Hugo said gravely. "But it was all a long time ago, and one can love many times and in many ways, you know. Simon was still very young when he loved Venetia. Now he is a man with a man's discernment. Don't let Venetia's machinations trouble you, my dear. She's a clever creature, but she's no match for Simon's devotion to you."

Jan swallowed. "No . . . no, of course not. I didn't think she was," she said aloud. But, inwardly, she was little comforted by Hugo's words. Simon might recognise Venetia's guile now – but would that stop him loving her? Did love take account of character? Surely not. Sometimes the most despicable people inspired the most enduring love.

Simon recovered consciousness at five o'clock, and Jan was allowed to see him for a few minutes during the evening, although the Sister warned her that, in the classic hospital phrase, he was still rather poorly and would not be up to talking yet.

Indeed, when Jan saw him, she thought he looked far more ill than when he had been unconscious. He managed to smile at her and held out his hand, but he made no reference to the circumstances leading up to the accident, and very soon a nurse looked in to indicate that her time was up. With a smile and a promise to come back as soon as they would let her, Jan crept out of the room, her heart heavy.

She was walking back to the entrance hall when the lift gates opened and a nurse wheeled out a bathchair. In it, strikingly lovely even in a hospital dressing gown, sat Venetia.

Since the chair was directly in her path, Jan had no choice but to stop and speak to the actress.

"They told me you were here," Venetia said coolly. "It must have given you a fright when you heard we'd smashed." Her face hardened and she looked down at the bandages on her left hand. "That damned driver — I'm sure he was drunk. If it hadn't been for Simon swerving the car, I might have been killed or scarred for life." For an instant, her eyes were icy with venom.

"Yes, you were lucky to get off so lightly," Jan agreed quietly. "I'm afraid Simon wasn't quite as fortunate." She paused for a second. "I didn't know you were with him."

Venetia's eyes flickered away from hers. Then she shivered and drew the collar of the dressing-gown closer to her throat.

"How draughty it is in this passage," she said.

The nurse looked at Jan. "I'm afraid we'll have to get on," she said pleasantly. "It's rather breezy along here. Perhaps you'd like to visit Miss Farr tomorrow."

Jan watched them pass down the corridor. She knew that Venetia had deliberately ignored her remark.

Hugo had been up to London during the afternoon and enlisted Mrs. Meldrum's help to collect some more clothes for Jan. He had not told her that this was the purpose of his visit, and she was touched by his thoughtfulness.

"You'd make a wonderful husband, Hugo," she said gratefully, her initial shyness of him long since forgotten.

The producer bowed his acknowledgement of this compliment. "Unfortunately my wife didn't share your high opinion of me," he said carelessly.

"Oh . . . you've been married! I'm sorry. Simon never mentioned it," she said in embarrassment.

"I doubt if he knows it. I rarely contemplate my brief excursion among the pitfalls of matrimony," he said lightly. "It was one of those wartime affairs which you are too young to remember. I dare say I thought my life was irreparably blighted at the time, but one soon learns that all misfortunes

fade into unimportance after a passage of time."

The owners of the inn, whom they now knew as Mr. and Mrs. Dawkes, were very much impressed when they learnt from the papers that Jan was the wife of a famous playwright and that "the poor young lady" who had been hurt in the accident was a real live Hollywood film star.

"Well, fancy that now," said Mrs. Dawkes, when Jan stopped to chat to her for a few moments during the evening. "I must say I'd never have guessed you were connected with the stage, madam. We had some theatricals staying here once – members of the repertory company they were. Two young gentlemen and a lady. Well, I'm not one to be narrow-minded nor to judge by appearances, but the way they carried on – you'd never believe it. Still, I suppose you always get a mixed bunch in any walk of life."

The following morning Jan was in her room when Mrs. Dawkes brought up a note. It had been delivered, she said, by one of the nurses from the hospital who had had to pass the inn on her way into the town.

Not recognising the flowery hand on the envelope, Jan looked at it in puzzlement for a moment before she opened it. The contents were brief and to the point.

"Please come and see me immediately," she read, "as I have something very important to tell you. – V. F."

Leaving a message for Hugo, who had gone to the post, Jan set out at once for the hospital, both alarmed and excited by the imperious summons.

Venetia was also in a private room, but she was no longer wearing hospital issue. Her creamy shoulders were veiled by a pretty bedjacket of transparent azure nylon with a froth of lace at the elbows. Her pale hair fell loosely about her face and she was skilfully made up, azure shadow enhancing the blue of her eyes, her lips vividly red. The room was full of flowers and baskets of fruit and there were books and magazines and a box of cigarettes on the table beside the bed.

When the nurse had closed the door behind her Venetia

indicated a chair by the window and said, "I had to send for you at once because I'm being transferred to the London Clinic tomorrow. These people do their best, I suppose, but the food is really appalling, and they can't cope with all the messages for me and the reporters and so on."

Jan sat down and waited for her to come to the purpose of her summons. It was plain that the Venetia of today was not the same Venetia who had called on her that sultry afternoon. This Venetia made no attempt to assume an air of gentle world-weary wistfulness, the poor little rich girl envious of the simple pleasures she was for ever denied. This Venetia was the fêted and haughty star.

"You said yesterday that you hadn't known I was with Simon that night," the actress said, reaching for a cigarette. "I couldn't explain the situation then because the nurse was listening and would probably have passed it on to one of the reporters who've been here. I know what they are: they pump everyone, even the cleaners."

She paused, exhaling a stream of smoke, her fingers twitching restively at the sheet.

"You realise, I suppose, that your marriage was a mistake?" she said, at length.

Jan half rose. "I – I don't know what you mean," she said sharply.

"Look; if we're going to get anywhere at all, we'll both have to be frank," Venetia said, in a patient tone. "Believe me, my dear, I know how you feel about this – none better. But it's no use prolonging the agony. Anyone with half an eye can see that you and Simon aren't hitting it off."

Jan fought down a lump in her throat, her hands clenching. "Did *he* tell you that?" she asked in a low voice.

There was a shaft of scorn in the actress's deep blue eyes as they met Jan's frightened grey ones.

"Haven't you discovered yet how loyal Simon is?" she asked, with an edge of contempt. "He'd go through hell before he'd let you suffer for his mistake. If you weren't so wrapped up in yourself you'd see that he *is* in hell."

"I'm *not* wrapped up in myself! That isn't fair. I want Simon to be happy. I'd do anything for him," Jan exclaimed indignantly.

Venetia's expression softened. "No; I suppose it wasn't quite fair," she admitted more gently. "You love him, so you can't help wanting to hold on to him. It isn't your fault that he's still in love with me — and I with him." She sighed. "Oh, what a wretched tangle it is."

"How do you know he still loves you?" Jan asked warily. She no longer trusted Venetia's apparent sincerity. "Has he told you so?"

"He doesn't have to," the actress said sadly. "It's in his eyes when he looks at me, in his voice, in everything. Oh, don't you *see*! We belong together. We always have! We always will!"

There was a passionate intensity in her voice, but Jan was still suspicious of her.

"Then why didn't you marry him when you had the chance?" she asked coldly.

Venetia crushed out her cigarette and sank back against the pillows. "Do you think I don't know what a fool I was to lose him?" she said wearily. "I'd give everything I possess if it would turn back the years and give me another chance."

"A lot of people say that, but they still have to pay for their mistakes," Jan replied crisply.

Venetia looked at her, and her beautiful eyes were misted with tears. "Are you really so hard?" she asked. "Oh, I know my life means nothing to you. You have every reason to hate me. But surely, for Simon . . ." She averted her face, her lips quivering.

Jan steeled herself to resist the tremulous voice, the drooping shoulders. "I should have thought that if *you* really loved Simon, you would have had the decency to leave him in peace — not force him to remember what is better forgotten," she said, her own voice not perfectly steady.

"There are some things one can never forget," Venetia retorted proudly. Then her expression softened again. "Oh,

Jan" – she stretched out her hand in a gesture of appeal – "I don't want to ruin your life. You probably won't believe it, but I like you. It's just that I can't see any point in three of us being miserable."

"So?"

Venetia sighed. "So I'm asking you to prove your love for him by giving him his freedom," she said quietly, after a moment.

"I see – just like that!" Jan snapped her fingers, a glint of anger in her eyes.

"You said a moment ago that Simon would go through hell before he'd let me suffer for his mistake," she reminded the actress. "Do you think he'll accept it quite calmly if I go to him and ask for a divorce? That is what you have in mind, I presume?"

"No, I don't think he would – if he knew how you really felt," Venetia admitted calmly. "But if you convinced him that you really wanted it that way –" She concluded the sentence with a gesture.

Jan stood up. The heavy scent of the flowers and the lingering cigarette smoke made her feel sick. "Unfortunately I haven't your gift for acting. I find it very hard to pretend things I don't really feel," she said, in a taut voice.

"You mean you're determined to hang on to him to the bitter end – and it will be bitter, you know," Venetia retorted. "There can't be much satisfaction in forcing a man to stay with you on those terms."

"What do you really know about the terms of our marriage?" Jan exclaimed, rounding on her. "If Simon has never forgotten you, why did he marry me? Nobody forced him into it! And what makes you think he'd be happier with you? You wrecked his life once. You might do it again. You say you'd give everything you have to turn back the clock. Would you? Would you really? I can't see you being content with my sort of life. You may *think* you would be, but once you'd got him back you'd start hankering for a life of your own as well. And from what I've heard of film stars'

attitude to marriage I don't think Simon would gain much."

Venetia's lips tightened. "So you'll go on warming his slippers and fussing over his meals and convince yourself that you're giving him everything he wants," she said icily. "Well, Simon needs more than that. He needs someone to amuse and stimulate him, someone who understands his work, someone who can give him the kind of love which you don't even understand. He's not a . . . a dull little clerk to be contented with three hot meals a day and mowing the lawn on Sundays. He's brilliant and sensitive and passionate. Living with you will stifle him. Why, in ten years' time he won't be our leading dramatist; he'll be just a second-rate hack. Oh, I don't say he isn't fond of you — in a tepid way. No man can live alone indefinitely, and I suppose your obvious hero-worship appealed to his vanity — he's only human. But I wonder if he'll be fond of you when you've destroyed him, when all his gifts have been sapped by insufferable boredom."

Her tone was so lashing that, instinctively, Jan recoiled from the scathing indictment. The masks were off now, and the actress made no attempt to conceal the depths of her animosity.

"Now run and tell him what I've said and make him even more wretched," she sneered. "Oh, God! Why — of all the girls who would have given their ears to marry him — did he have to pick a smug, selfish little limpet like you?"

At this point the nurse returned with a glass of barley water, and Jan took advantage of her entrance to slip quickly out of the room. As she closed the door she heard Venetia consigning the hospital and its staff to the devil.

Leaning against the wall in the corridor, she made a valiant effort to still her trembling before anyone should see her. The vituperative scene in the sickroom had left her nerves and senses raw, and she felt both physically and mentally dazed by Venetia's storm of accusations.

"Good morning, Mrs. Webster." The Sister whom she had first seen came briskly along the corridor. "I was told

you were visiting Miss Farr. Perhaps you'd like to see your husband now. He's very much brighter today."

"Oh . . . now? But isn't it nearly lunch time?" Jan said unthinkingly. To have to face Simon immediately after her ordeal with Venetia appalled her.

The Sister looked at her curiously. "Well, of course, if you prefer —"

"No . . . no, I'd like to see him," Jan said hastily. "He's better, you say? I — I'm very glad."

The Sister led the way into Simon's room. "Here's someone who will do you quite as much good as any medicine, Mr. Webster," she said archly.

Simon shifted himself higher against the pillows. "Hello, Jan," he said quietly.

When the Sister had gone, Jan sat down and carefully smoothed her skirt. "I'm glad you're feeling better. We — Hugo and I — were very worried about you."

"I'm sorry you had such a scare," he said.

"Oh, that's all right. One can't help having an accident," she said, trying to keep her voice steady and avoiding his eyes.

There was a difficult silence while she tried desperately to find something else to say.

"I — I expect Hugo will come up this afternoon," she managed, after a moment. "He's been such a help. I don't know how I would have managed without him."

"Good. I must remember to thank him." Simon's tone was cool with a faint edge of sarcasm and, looking up, she saw that his eyes had a glint of anger in them.

"What is it?" she asked, puzzled.

He shrugged, his face becoming expressionless. "You haven't got any cigarettes on you, I suppose? I don't know what they've done with my things."

"No, I'm sorry, I haven't. I'll get you some this afternoon."

"It doesn't matter." He shifted restlessly, frowning as if the movement hurt him. "Look, maybe this isn't the mo-

ment, but I think it's time we had a straight talk about things," he said flatly.

"Things – what things?" Jan asked, stiffening.

He looked at her and again there was that flash of impatience and anger in his eyes. "The future," he said. "What's going to happen when I'm up and about again."

She stared at him. "I – I don't think I understand."

"No, you're pretty adept at ignoring the obvious," he agreed. "Quite an expert, in fact. Well, I'm sorry, but I can't take it any more. I'm tired of living on a tight-rope and I don't intend to go on. We'll have it out, and we'll have it out now."

Jan bent her head, feeling her inside contract into a small hard core of agony. So Venetia had been wrong? Simon was not prepared to go on living a lie, to sacrifice his happiness to protect her from pain. And then, sitting there, her hopes crumbling into dust, she knew that she could not endure to hear him say the words which would end their marriage. To lose him, to know Venetia had won: that would have to be borne. But to have the echo of his ultimatum ringing in her ears through all the weeks and months of heartbreak – that she could not support.

"No, Simon – don't," she said brokenly. "I know what you're going to say, but I don't want to hear it. Just let me go away and . . . and that will be the end of it."

And, ignoring his swift protest, half-blinded by tears, she ran from the room and fled down the passage.

It was nearly three o'clock when she returned to the inn after walking and walking and walking, with no escape from her misery.

"Oh, here you are, Mrs. Webster. Mr. Sallender was getting quite anxious about you. I told him you were most likely having your lunch with your hubby," the landlady said, coming out of the dining-room as Jan entered the hall. "Mr. Sallender's just gone up to the hospital. I wonder you didn't pass in the street. It isn't two minutes since he left. And how's Mr. Webster today? Better, I hope?"

"Yes, much better, thank you," Jan said, with an effort. "I – I have to go back to London this afternoon. Is there a train, do you know?"

"Why, yes. There's one through about three o'clock," Mrs. Dawkes said, looking surprised. "Will you be coming back tonight or will you stay over till the morning?"

"I'm not sure," Jan said hurriedly. "Mr. Sallender will let you know about that. I'm leaving a note for him."

In her room, she bundled her possessions into the case in which Hugo had brought them, then sat down to write to Hugo. A few lines sufficed to tell him that she was leaving the inn and that Simon would explain her reasons to him. (He was probably doing just that at this very moment, she thought wretchedly.) Then she added a postscript thanking him for all his kindness and understanding, blotted the page and thrust it into an envelope.

Her letter to Simon was not as easily composed, and she made several false starts before, mindful that she had very little time, she had to be satisfied with her fourth attempt. Reading it over, she was painfully conscious of its inadequacy, but could think of no better way in which to phrase her farewell to him.

"DEAR SIMON" (she had written):

"I am sorry I ran out on you this morning, but there seemed no point in saying what, as you pointed out, we have both known for a long time. I'm sorry to have been such a nuisance to you. It has all been my fault. I always knew you were still in love with Venetia, and it was very wrong of me to marry you, knowing that she was free. (I read it in the paper on the morning of our wedding. I hope you will be able to forgive me. I didn't realise how wicked of me it was.) Please don't feel that you have spoilt my life or anything like that. I shall soon get over it. I'm going away now, and I don't expect we shall see each other again, except at the divorce perhaps. I don't know much about them and I'm sorry if you will have to wait a long

time to get one. I hope you will be happy with Venetia. I shall always be grateful for all your kindness to me.

“JAN.”

At two minutes past three the train pulled out of the station with Jan huddled in the corner of an empty compartment. The journey seemed endless. She spent the night in a drab commercial hotel, having first rung up Aunt Laura to ask if she might come to the cottage the following day. If Miss Meldrum was surprised by this request, she made no comment, accepting with her customary calm Jan's stammered explanation that Simon was out of town and that she was at a loose end for a few days. It was only later, tossing and turning on the lumpy single bed, that Jan wondered if her aunt had read accounts of Simon's accident in the papers.

The next day was cool and cloudy, and the journey to the coast wearisomely slow, the train stopping at every wayside halt. The station in the market town five miles from the village did not boast a taxi, so the last lap had to be covered by a country bus.

It was raining when the bus reached the village, and by the time she had walked to the cottage her shoes were beginning to squelch and water was trickling down her neck.

“I've a hot bath all ready for you and a steak-and-kidney pie in the oven,” Miss Meldrum said, without preliminary, as she opened the door.

And, before Jan could open her mouth, she found herself being hustled into the bathroom and ordered to save her breath until she had bathed and changed. It was not until she lay back in the warm water – scented with purple crystals from a large glass jar which her aunt had probably bought at a Women's Institute bazaar – that she realised how desperately tired she was.

A savoury aroma was issuing from the kitchen when she emerged from the bathroom, Miss Meldrum's serviceable wool dressing-gown over her underwear. Her aunt bade her

sit down and set a generous helping of pie on the table before her, making no remark beyond stating that it had been a poor day for travel. As soon as Jan had finished her meal she was swept off to bed.

It was not until after lunch the next day that Miss Meldrum suddenly laid down her knitting and said bluntly, "Now I think you'd better tell me why you've run away from your husband. I presume that's what you're up to, since most girls like to be at hand when their husbands are ill in hospital."

Jan flushed and fidgeted. She knew that her aunt was entitled to be told the truth, but her break with Simon was too recent for her to be able to speak of it dispassionately.

"I was afraid you would know about the accident," she admitted unhappily. "But he's better now, Aunt Laura. I didn't leave till they said he was going to be all right."

"But you left nevertheless," her aunt said drily.

"Yes." Jan twisted her engagement ring. Tomorrow she would put it in a box and send it to Simon's solicitors. She knew their address because she had been to the office with him when their purchase of the house had been in progress. She would not keep any of the things he had given her. They would only serve to remind her of all she had lost.

"Let me see, how long have you been married now?" her aunt asked contemplatively. "Not six months yet, is it? Mm . . . rather early days to throw in your hand, I would have thought. Or has he been misbehaving himself and this is your way of teaching him a lesson?"

"Please, Aunt Laura — I don't want to talk about it," Jan said painfully. "If you don't mind, I think I'll go for a walk." And, jumping up, she hurried out of the garden where they were sitting, and walked swiftly towards the village.

Her aunt was still sitting in a deck-chair when she returned to the cottage about five o'clock. She put away her knitting and removed her spectacles as her niece approached, but, if she noticed the tell-tale redness of Jan's eyes, she made no remark.

They had supper in the garden and stayed outside until the sun began to sink behind the woods and the air grew too cool for comfort. Then they put the chairs in the summer house and went indoors, Miss Meldrum to write some letters and Jan to sit with a book on her lap, her eyes fixed unseeingly on the opening page.

"Switch on the wireless, will you, dear?" her aunt said, as the clock on the mantelpiece began to whirr before it chimed nine.

Jan tuned in to Radio Four and moved to the window, watching the last opalescent glow fade from the sky, and dreading the long night. Without interest, she listened to the announcer summarising the day's news.

"Mr. Simon Webster, the well-known dramatist, who was injured in a car accident earlier this week, was discharged from St. Maude's Hospital today. Miss Venetia Farr, the film actress, who was also hurt in the accident, is now in a London nursing-home where she is recovering from minor injuries."

Jan swung round, her hand to her throat. The expression on her aunt's face confirmed that she had not imagined the brief announcement, delivered in the same measured tone as all the other headlines. There was a brief pause before the announcer began to refer to each item at greater length.

"Discharged! But he can't have been. The Sister told me he would be there for at least a fortnight," she burst out bewilderedly.

Her aunt opened her spectacle case and began to polish her glasses with a piece of chamois. She signalled to Jan to contain her disquiet until the news reader gave further details.

To her niece, pacing feverishly about the room, the bulletin seemed interminable. The calm, well-modulated voice giving information about the latest labour strike, a Government statement and a wage increase fretted her nerves until she wanted to stamp with impatience.

"Mr. Simon Webster, the playwright, who was expected to remain in hospital for a further week, left St. Maude's Hospital early this morning. Mr. Webster, who was reported as being seriously injured after his car had been in collision with another vehicle late on Monday night, has been suffering from concussion, fractured ribs and cuts to his hands. His destination, on leaving the hospital, was not revealed."

Switching off the final item, Jan turned to her aunt. "What can it mean?" she demanded. "They must be mad to let him out so soon. Why, he isn't fit to be up."

"He knows where you are, I suppose?" Miss Meldrum enquired.

Jan shook her head. "No. Nobody does."

Her aunt clicked her tongue disapprovingly. "Then he's obviously trying to find you — probably at the expense of a relapse," she said severely.

"Oh, no! He won't do that. He doesn't want to find me," Jan said positively.

Her aunt put her finger to her lips and inclined her head towards the window, listening. "Mm . . . then I wonder who this is?" she said drily, as the sound of a car could be heard at the gate.

As the car door slammed, the garden gate creaked and two pairs of feet crunched over the gravel, Jan looked wildly round the room as if seeking some means of escape.

"I won't see him! It isn't fair," she said vehemently, as someone rapped on the knocker and her aunt moved past her to the door.

But, even as she darted after her, intending to shut herself in her room, her aunt flung wide the front door and urged the visitors to enter.

For a long moment Jan met Simon's eyes, her own dilated with alarm. No one spoke.

Then Hugo said, "Miss Meldrum? My name is Sallender. I wonder if I might step into your kitchen for a moment.

Simon has a private matter to discuss with his wife."

"Yes, of course, Mr. Sallender. Perhaps you'd like a cup of tea if you've driven all the way from London. I'll put the kettle on," Miss Meldrum said readily, and led him down the passage.

Since she had had no real hope of escaping, Jan moved back into the sitting-room and heard Simon close the door.

"You must be crazy — coming all this way when you're not even fit to be up," she said angrily, over her shoulder. Her hands were trembling and there was a constriction in her throat. "What do you want, anyway?" she demanded.

Simon moved forward into the lamplight and removed his coat, tossing it over a chair. Sneaking a rapid glance at him, she saw that he was dangerously pale with heavy shadows under his eyes. A terrible longing to cradle his head in her arms and kiss his tired eyes came over her, but she fought it down.

"What do you want?" she repeated.

"Only what I've always wanted — you," he said quietly.

Jan drew in a sharp breath. "I — I don't know what you mean by that," she said coldly.

An instant later the fingers of his unbandaged hand were biting into her arm and his other hand was forcing up her chin, so that she had to look at him.

"Then it's about time you did," he said harshly. "I love you, d'you hear? I love you, you silly little fool. Venetia means nothing to me. It's you I want, and, by heaven, I'm going to have you."

And then, unbelievably, regardless of his strapped ribs, he was crushing her against him and kissing her as he had kissed her once before, his lips hungry and demanding as they closed over hers. For perhaps five seconds, Jan was passive in his arms. Then all the love and yearning of past months welled up inside her and, flinging her arms round his neck, she eagerly returned his kiss.

It was several minutes before, breathless and glowing, she

recovered herself enough to say, "You must sit down, Simon. You'll make yourself ill."

He allowed her to push him gently into a chair, but kept a firm grip on her hand and said huskily. "The disease I'm suffering from is incurable, my darling. No, come here. You haven't completely convinced me yet."

"Convinced you of what?" Jan asked presently, when he released her again.

"That in spite of the peculiar charade you've been playing out all these months, you really do love me."

"But you must have known I did – always," she protested. "It was you who seemed so . . . so remote and unapproachable." Her forehead puckered. "I don't understand. The other day, at the hospital, you said –"

"I was about to say that the charade had come to an end, but you weren't around long enough to hear me," he cut in swiftly. "The next thing I knew I was reading a letter of farewell. Now, suppose we try and work out how all these misunderstandings came about, my love. In the first place, where did you get this idea that I was mixed up with Venetia?"

"I suppose it began when I learnt that you had once been engaged to her," Jan said slowly. "It seemed impossible that anyone could forget having been in love with anyone so . . . so beautiful. And then, once I knew about it, there were a dozen things which suggested that you had never really got over her. That day in the cellar when you saw a piece about your engagement to her in an old paper and acted so strangely afterwards, for instance."

"How did you know I'd seen that?" he asked.

Jan explained.

"I see," he said wryly. "I wish you'd told me. It would have saved us both a lot of unhappiness." He stroked back a lock of hair which had fallen across her forehead. "I suppose I should have told you about Venetia at the first, but it never occurred to me that that part of my life could have any bearing on us."

He leaned back in the chair, and Jan slid to her knees on the rug in front of him and rested her arms on his knees, delighting in the touch of his fingers on her cheek.

"I was never really in love with Venetia at all," he began slowly. "You see, I put everything I'd got into that first play, and Joanna, the girl in the play, was a kind of embodiment of all that a man looks for in a woman. At least, she was to me. Venetia brought Joanna to life. She was no longer just a figment of my imagination but a living, breathing woman. It may be difficult for you to understand this and you'll have to remember that I was still pretty callow, but . . . well, I fell in love with her. It was only later that I realised that Joanna was still only a dream-image: that Venetia was only acting a part when she made her come to life for me."

He paused, his eyes sombre, and Jan sat silently at his feet, content to let him explain in his own time.

"I think Joanna had some strange fascination for Venetia, too," he said presently. "Perhaps she was the kind of girl Venetia would have liked to be if she could have chosen her own temperament. At any rate, in working up the part, she completely submerged her own personality. For the first few weeks of the run she literally 'lived' Joanna – which was why she got those 'rave' notices. Of course, it's a measure of her ability that, in reality, she is the very antithesis of someone like Joanna."

He fell silent again, and Jan pressed his hand against her cheek.

"Hugo had tried to warn me what she was really like," he continued, after a moment, "but at that age one rarely listens to advice. I dare say I wouldn't have believed him if he'd told me the bald truth. The break didn't happen all at once, although even if I hadn't discovered . . . what I did, I think it would have come eventually. You see, after the first few weeks of our engagement, a number of minor incidents made me vaguely uneasy about her. Then, one night when she wasn't expecting me, I went round to her flat. She had a man with her – a member of the company. That was the end

of it as far as I was concerned."

"Oh, Simon — how horrible for you," Jan said compassionately, guessing the agony of betrayal and humiliation which he must have suffered.

His mouth twisted in a wry grimace. "Not really. It could never have lasted even if I hadn't found her with the other chap. But it did disillusion me about women for quite a time."

"But after doing that to you, how could she think that . . . that she could win you back?" Jan said incredulously. Then, realising that he did not know about her stormy interview with the actress at the hospital, she explained what had happened. "Why, she talked about you being 'made for each other,' " she said bewilderedly.

"She did, did she?" he said grimly. "I wish I'd known that this morning. I'd have called in at the Clinic and scared the daylights out of her." He caressed the nape of Jan's neck, his eyes very tender as he looked into her upturned face. "The trouble with women like Venetia is that they think they're irresistible," he said drily. "I suppose it has always irritated her to remember that one poor fish got off the hook, and seeing that you were no match for her in trouble-making, she decided that if she couldn't revenge herself on me, she'd give you a taste of hell."

"Which she certainly did," Jan said, with a reminiscent shiver.

"Incidentally, I haven't yet explained why she was with me at the time of the smash-up. Aren't you at all curious about that?" he asked. "In the light of what you imagined about us, it must have looked pretty suspicious."

"Curious!" Jan smiled at his choice of word. "I was seething with jealousy," she admitted.

"Well, that was another instance of her machinations," he said. "I should have tumbled to it, but, not knowing what you thought was going on, and being completely indifferent to her now, I thought the set-up was genuine. You see, she rang me up from some outlandish village and said that her

car had broken down and there was no other transport available so could I possibly rescue her. She said she'd tried several other people but they were all out, and she didn't want to spend the night in the wilds. I thought it was a bit odd, but as I wanted a run out anyway I didn't see any harm in picking her up. I found her sitting in the office of a small wayside garage. She'd had a flask of brandy in the car with her and was slightly tight. When we got in the car, she started raking up the past and saying that I was the only man she had ever really cared for and couldn't I forgive her. It was all rather nauseating, and in the end I had to be fairly brutal to shut her up. A few minutes later some half-witted speed fiend nearly did us all in."

"I see," Jan said thoughtfully. "But what I *don't* see is why, if you really did want to marry me, you were so . . . so casual and offhand." She flushed and bent her head. "Tonight is the very first time you've ever said you love me."

"The first time?" He looked genuinely astonished. "But — good lord! — I've been crazy about you."

"You never *said* so," Jan answered, in a small voice.

"I suppose I took it for granted that you knew how I felt without my having to put it into words," he said slowly. "Perhaps that's one of the differences between the sexes. When a man makes love to a woman — unless it's a casual affair — he is proving what he feels about her in the most effective way possible — or at least that's how he sees it. Did you think I could hold you in my arms and kiss you, and not love you?"

"I didn't know what to think," she said shyly. "And after Venetia had come back you didn't seem to want to make love to me. Sometimes, when I even touched your hand, you seemed to draw away from me, as if . . . as if you couldn't bear to have me near you."

"Oh, God! What fools we've been," he said huskily, drawing her up into his arms. "I thought you were afraid of me. Once we were married, a change seemed to come over you. You never came into my arms of your own accord —

you seemed to have put up a barrier which I couldn't get through. I tried to work out what had happened to change you, and the only answer seemed to be that you'd married me to get away from your family, to have a life of your own. I supposed that you hadn't realised what living with me would be like and were horrified at finding yourself in an even worse situation than before. I thought perhaps you'd been in love with the idea of being in love, and that the realities of marriage had come as an unpleasant shock."

"Oh, no! It was never that," Jan exclaimed vehemently. "I didn't dare tell you how much I loved you because I thought it would only embarrass you. And then – all the time we were in Holland – I had that awful secret about Venetia's being free again on my conscience. I felt that I'd cheated you."

"Absurd child! You're all I've ever wanted," he said softly, against her temple. "But not as a meek little mouse-bride, my darling love. How many times must I say the words 'I love you' before you are truly convinced?"

His lips were on her closed eyelids, and she trembled on the threshold of a paradise which had seemed for ever unattainable.

"A hundred times," she said dreamily. "Five times a day."

"Five times a day for the rest of our lives," he agreed, his mouth close to hers. "Oh, Jan . . . my little love."

It was several minutes before Jan remembered that he had been driving for many hours and was still an invalid.

"Your ribs . . . you ought to be resting," she murmured anxiously, withdrawing herself from his arms.

"To the devil with my ribs. Kiss me!"

She was about to obey this command when a tap at the door caused Simon to stifle a curse.

"So sorry to butt in, but Mr. Sallender is leaving. He's going to spend the night at the Lord Nelson," Miss Meldrum explained, looking round the door. Then, taking in the situation she had interrupted: "I gather you've straightened things out."

Simon stood up and grinned at her. "Yes, we've decided we can put up with each other after all — at least for the next forty years or so," he said, rumpling Jan's hair with a gesture of affectionate teasing.

"Well, that's a relief," Miss Meldrum said bluntly. "It was really very tiresome having her mooning about in misery all the time. You should keep her in order better, Simon. She needs a firm hand."

"I know. She's a recalcitrant little creature," Simon agreed. "By the way, am I to go to the pub with Hugo or have you room for me here?"

Miss Meldrum asserted her authority. "You're a very silly young man to have come all this way without medical permission. Yes, Mr. Sallender has told me how you refused to listen to the doctors," she said sternly. "Well, I don't intend to have a patient on my hands, so you will go straight back to bed in my room, and stay there until our doctor has had a look at you."

She paused, as if daring him to defy her, and added: "I shall make a bed on the couch. No, don't argue: I've done it before. Jan's bed is too small for two people, and with those cracked ribs and probably running a temperature, you'll doubtless have a very uncomfortable night. Tomorrow, if the doctor agrees, you can go where you please. Now run and heat some milk and fill a hot-water bottle, Jan. You may not realise it yet, but men are intolerable invalids, so we don't want the boy to crock up."

Jan laughed, but did as she was bidden. Although Simon protested that he was perfectly all right, and there was no need to coddle him, he was obviously close to exhaustion and in considerable pain.

A little later, sitting on the side of her aunt's bed while he unwillingly drank the hot milk, she wondered how he could ever have seemed such an enigma to her.

"I don't know what the devil I have to have this bottle for," he said with a grin, edging the old-fashioned earthenware container away from his feet. "One would think it was

the middle of winter. Still, your aunt's a good-hearted old body. We must ask her to come and stay with us."

Jan giggled. "Did you hear her reproving Hugo for being your accomplice in crime? I think he's a little afraid of her."

They talked for a little while longer and, for Jan, it was a keen delight to be able to chatter to him without the fear of blurting out something which was better kept silent. Presently she turned off the lamp and bent to kiss him good night.

"Darling Simon. I'm so happy," she whispered.

He pulled her down to him for a moment. "I think we should have another honeymoon," he said softly. "Think about it and tell me where you'd like to go at breakfast. Sleep well, sweetheart."

It was Midsummer's Eve and, lying quietly in the other bedroom, Jan watched the moonlight filtering through the curtains and wondered if there really was a magic abroad, or if it was only her own happiness which seemed to fill the air with faint far-away music and sweet summer scents. Her thoughts drifted peacefully into the future . . . to summers far ahead when all that had gone before today would seem as ephemeral as a passing cloud-shadow, when their love would not only encompass the two of them but also a small Simon — perhaps several small Simons.

And then, thinking about the children they would have, she knew that she had finally shed all the doubts and uncertainties of girlhood: that she was, at last, a woman and a very lucky one. Tomorrow, she thought sleepily, they would go down to the shore where they had first met: tomorrow would be the true beginning of their life together.